University of Alberta

Home Sewing and the Construction of Feminine Identities in Alberta, 1950-1970

by

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This is dedicated to my mother Mary McLean and my grandmother Marie Phillips for among many other important things, teaching me how to sew and knit.

It is also for Mark, who grew up in a fabric store.

Abstract

This thesis explores identities constructed by Alberta women through home dressmaking in the 1950s and 1960s. Fifteen home sewers were interviewed. Period sources were read to provide context and identify discourses of home sewing and femininity that were operating during these decades.

Social positioning theory provided a framework for analyzing women's conversation. Looking at how women positioned themselves in conversation provided insight into women's agency and how they locate positions of power, even in historical periods that are considered repressive. It also provided some insight into how constructions of feminine identity change as societal discourses around the roles of women change, and how this transition is not always a smooth one.

A feminist museum exhibit was created based on suggestions for feminist museum practice and women's stories of home sewing. Successes and failures of the exhibit were discussed for the benefit of others wishing to create feminist museum exhibits.

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Table of Contents

Introduction *1*

DEFINITIONS 4

Review Of Related Literature *8*

MEANING AND HOME DRESSMAKING 8
THE ROLE OF DRESS IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION. 8
HOME SEWING, (MATERIAL) CULTURE AND IDENTITY. 11
INTERPRETATION OF MEANING IN SEWING AND HOMEMADE CLOTHING. 13
CHANGING TIMES: ALBERTA IN THE 1950S AND 1960S 14
WOMEN'S HISTORY AND MUSEUMS 18
PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN MUSEUM EXHIBITS. 18
PROBLEMATIC MUSEUM PRACTICES OF COLLECTION AND CLASSIFICATION. 20
WORKING PARADIGM OF MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS AND THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN SOCIETY. 22
FEMINIST APPROACHES TO MUSEUM EXHIBITS. 24
FEMINIST APPROACHES TO ORAL HISTORY AND WRITING WOMEN'S LIFE STORIES 26

Method *28*

DATA COLLECTION 28
INTERVIEWS. 28
OBJECT AND ARCHIVAL RESEARCH. 31
ANALYSIS 33
VOICES IN THE RESEARCH 34
VALIDITY, RELIABILITY AND CREDIBILITY OF STUDY 36
RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL 38
BOUNDARIES OF RESEARCH 40

The Many Meanings of Home Sewing in Alberta, 1950 - 1970 *41*

THE PARTICIPANTS 41
THE DISCOURSE OF "HOME SEWING" 41
BEING ATTRACTIVE AS A WOMAN. 42
STRETCHING THE FAMILY BUDGET. 54
BEING CREATIVE AS A WOMAN. 63
DIVERGENT DISCOURSES: DRESS, HOME DRESSMAKING AND FEMININE IDENTITIES IN THE 1960S 75

Patterns and Variations: The Exhibit 81

Conclusion 96

SUMMARY 96
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH 101

Bibliography 103

Appendix A: The Participants 116

Appendix B: Patterns and Variations: The Many Meanings of Home Sewing in Alberta, 1950-1970 (Full Text) 119

Appendix C: Ethics Documents 129

INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO HOME DRESSMAKERS 129
LETTER OF INFORMATION 130
CONSENT FORM (CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY) 132
CONSENT FORM (CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN EXHIBIT) 133

Appendix D: Interview Questions 134

INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE 134
FINAL INTERVIEW GUIDE 136

List of Figures

Figures 1a & 1b. Anna Duncan.

Figures 2a & 2b. *Vogue* patterns.

Figure 3. Sample of Cathy Roy's overcast seams on dress made in high school Home Economics class.

Figure 4. Bound buttonholes on a coat made by Cathy Roy, 1969.

Figure 5. Roy family, 1967.

Figure 6. Lois Lindholm.

Figures 7a & 7b. Gordine Thomson.

Figure 8a. Anna Duncan.

Figure 8b. *Vogue* pattern 1376.

Figure 9a. *McCall's* pattern 5184.

Figure 9b. Gordine Thomson.

Figure 10. Invitation to *Patterns and Variations: The Many Meanings of Home Sewing in Alberta 1950- 1970.*

Figure 11. Title panel, *Patterns and Variations.*

Figure 12. *Patterns and Variations.*

Figure 13. *For a Lucky Girl who Sews* and *Whether You Work at Home or Away.*

Figure 14. *Patterns for Small Fry.*

Figure 15. Long view of exhibit.

Figures 16. *The ABC's of Sewing.*

Figure 17. *Make Your Dream Dress Come True* and *A Blouse in the Making.*

Figure 18. *Exclusively Yours* and *Girls Who Sew are Girls Who Know.*

Introduction

It has been stated that, "the goal of women's history is a fundamental reconstruction of our knowledge of the past" (Strong-Boag & Fellman, 1991, p. 9). More than simply filling in the gaps, women's history is revolutionary in that it questions what has traditionally been defined as historically significant. It asserts that women's experiences, though largely invisible to the traditional historic record, are valid and worthy of exploration and interpretation. In order to reconstruct our knowledge of the past, we must acknowledge that there is a vast segment of history that has been unwritten and remains unexplored.

Over the past thirty years, great strides have been made in researching and writing Canadian women's histories. However, though many aspects of women's lives have been studied, the women who made and wore home sewn clothes are "barely remembered" (Buckley, 1999, p. 66). Burman (1999a) argues that the very ordinary and domestic qualities of home dressmaking have made it invisible to historians and other scholars. Sociologists and historians have undertaken ethnographic and oral history projects (e.g., Baillargeon, 1999; Harvey, 1993; Luxton, 1980; Roberts, 1995; Silverman, 1984/1998) to study women's labour, with the varied intents of making the "invisible" visible, giving voice to women's experiences, and illustrating women's hidden contributions to domestic and larger economies. Home sewing, though often mentioned, is rarely the subject of analysis in these.

Studies that have focused on sewing have dealt primarily with women's motivations for sewing, the impacts of sewing technologies or the activities of seamstresses working for pay (e.g., Blenkarn, 1986; Emery, 1999; Fernandez, 1994; Gamber, 1992; Putnam, 1999; Schofield-Tomschin, 1999; Smith, 1987; Walsh; 1979). There are very few studies that have investigated the experience of home dressmaking. Yet enrolment in sewing classes and sewing machine and pattern sales increased during the years immediately following World War II, and in 1958 *Time* magazine estimated that 20 percent of all women's and children's clothing was sewn at home ("Sew and Reap," p. 70). In 1963, Betty Friedan lamented the fact that home sewing had become a million dollar industry. There appears to be a significant gap in knowledge about an important experience in many post-war women's lives.

Integral to the understanding of history is an understanding of the culture and cultural values of the people being considered. Dress is a site in which cultural values are reproduced and, sometimes, repudiated. So great is our understanding of the powerful messages conveyed by clothing that a common proverb is, "the clothes make the man." Yet in Alberta in the 1950s and 60s, it was often women who made the clothes. What did the act of home dressmaking mean to women? What meanings did they read into the clothing they produced? Buckley (1999) states that, "the process of making and designing, the clothes themselves, and the ways in which they were worn reveal aspects of women's identities" (p. 55). What did Alberta women reveal about themselves through the clothing that they sewed at home? These questions form the basis of this research project.

This project is also concerned with portrayals of women in museums. Although women are depicted in museum exhibits, they are usually secondary to male characters and are present only to support the male centred storyline (Porter, 1991). Rather than examining real women's experiences, museum exhibits tend to reinforce dominant cultural stereotypes of women and their roles in history and in society (see Katriel, 1997; Porter, 2004; Read, 1996).

History museums are often conservative spaces, built and supported by community leaders to commemorate their own achievements and those of their forefathers, whose experiences have traditionally been seen as more significant than those of their foremothers. However, feminist approaches to women's history and museum work can make room for women's stories and experiences in museum histories. One such approach is the creation of exhibits that make women active subjects in the story and allow them to speak with their own voices. A museum exhibition based on women's experiences of home dressmaking and homemade clothing provides an example of feminist museum practice that could be implemented elsewhere.

One goal of feminism is to uncover hidden power relationships. In research, this means openly recognizing that knowledge does not exist in isolation from people, rather it is a product created by people (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Feminist researchers (e.g., DeVault, 1999; Harding, 1987; Kirby & McKenna) acknowledge that no research can exist in isolation from the researcher, and that who we are as people shapes and informs

the research that we undertake, the methods that we choose and our resulting analysis and conclusions.

My interest in this project comes from my intermingled identities of home dressmaker, museum professional and feminist. As a home dressmaker, I know that the clothing I make has meaning and that I very consciously choose patterns and fabrics in accordance with the "self" that I want to project. I have flirted with alternative subcultures since I was a very shy teenager. In a way I used my clothing as the voice that I denied myself otherwise through my shyness. Through dress I could show the world that I was interesting. If I was generally afraid to talk to people, at least my clothing gave them some clue as to what I was like inside.

Once, I described my reason for sewing as being akin to the way *Emily of New Moon* described her relationship to writing:

> "Tell me this – if you knew you would be poor as a church mouse all your life – if you knew you'd never have a line published – would you still go on writing – *would* you?"
>
> "Of course I would," said Emily disdainfully. "Why I *have* to write – I can't help it by times – I've just *got* to" (Montgomery, 1934, p. 350).

I sometimes feel that I *have* to sew. If I can sew clothes that help to explain "me" to the outside world, so much the better.

As a museum professional, I have seen how exhibits and programming help to reproduce negative attitudes towards women's work and women's roles in history. I worked at a pioneer village where children participated in "Day in the Life" programs. Part of the program involved dividing the children for gender specific tasks. Invariably the boys ridiculed the girls about having to sweep floors and "do laundry" by taunting them with the fact that they were girls. I am not certain what was so much more glamorous about gathering firewood, except that it had not been tainted by the stigma of being "women's work."

As a feminist, I have rebelled against museum constructions of history that exclude the experiences of a populace that is not white, middle-class and male. I have struggled with questions of how to bring in the experiences of other groups while working within environments that rarely acknowledge the validity of their stories or why

they should be incorporated into the storyline of the museum. These struggles and experiences have sparked my interest and will inform the ways in which I interact with home dressmakers and their stories.

It is essential to recognize that while I can collect and analyze other women's stories, I cannot speak for them. Incorporating my voice into the research removes me from the position of objective observer and places me in the project, contextualizing my analysis as belonging to a "real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests" (Harding, 1987, p. 9). This is important, as it is only by declaring our beliefs, behaviours and assumptions that we can "hope to produce understandings and explanations which are free (or, at least, more free) of distortion from the unexamined beliefs and behaviours of social scientists themselves" (Harding, p. 9).

Definitions

The purpose of this section is to make clear the intended meaning of words and concepts that are used frequently throughout this paper.

Identity: Identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people. People's identities are achieved by a subtle interweaving of many different 'threads'. There is the 'thread' of age (for example they may be a child, a young adult or very old), that of class (depending on their occupation, income and level of education), ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so on. All these (and many more) are woven together to produce the fabric of a person's identity. Each of these components is 'constructed' through the discourses that are present in our culture – the discourses of age, of gender, of education, of sexuality and so on. We are the end-product, the combination, of the particular 'versions' of these things that are available to us (Burr, 1995, p. 51).

Discourse: A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event (or person or class of

persons), a particular way of representing it or them in a certain light. If we accept the view… that a multitude of alternative versions of events is potentially available through language, this means that, surrounding any one object, event, person, etc., there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the object in question, a different way of representing it to the world (Burr, 1995, p. 48).
Discourses are not simply abstract ideas, ways of talking about and representing things that, as it were, float like balloons far above the real world. Discourses are intimately connected to the way that society is organized and run (Burr, 1995, p. 54).

Femininity: Prevailing discourses of femininity often construct women as, say, nurturant, close to nature, emotional, negatively affected by their hormones, empathic and vulnerable. From this it is only a short step to the recommendation that women are particularly able to care for young children, and that they should do so, that they are unsuited to careers in top management or positions of responsibility, and that they should avoid potentially dangerous activities such as walking home alone at night or hitch-hiking…. The discourses that form our identity are intimately tied to the structures and practices that are lived out in society from day to day, and it is in the interest of relatively powerful groups that some discourses and not others receive the stamp of 'truth'. If we accept that men, relative to women, are still in a more powerful position in society, then we can say that prevailing discourses of femininity serve to uphold this power inequality (Burr, 1995, p. 54/55).

Femininity, the behaviour expected and encouraged in women, though obviously related to the biological sex of the individual, is shaped by society… Nevertheless, the conviction that femininity is natural to women (and unnatural in men) is tenacious…. Femininity is a lived identity for women either embraced or resisted. The feminine ideal is an historically changing concept of what women should be, while the feminine stereotype is a collection of attributes which is imputed to women and against which their every concern is measured…. The feminine stereotype categorizes everything women are and everything we do as entirely, essentially and eternally feminine, denying differences

between women according to our economic and social position, or our geographical and historical place (Parker, 1984, p. 3- 4).

Feminism: "Feminism" is a movement, and a set of beliefs, that problematize gender inequality. Feminists believe that women have been subordinated through men's greater power, variously expressed in different arenas. They value women's lives and concerns, and work to improve women's status. While this kind of definition is broadly inclusive, it is also misleadingly simple. There are many feminisms, with different emphases and aims.... Despite this variation, feminists are united by a sense of accountability to a movement that is best conceived as a changing and contested discourse. (DeVault, 1999, p. 28).

Is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels – sex, race, and class, to name a few – and a commitment to reorganizing...society, so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desires (hooks, 1981, p. 194-5).

Is an entire world view or a *gestalt*, not just a laundry list of "women's issues." Feminist theory provides a basis for understanding every area of our lives, and a feminist perspective can affect the world politically, culturally, economically and spiritually. (Bunch, 1983, p. 250).

It refers to the conviction that our production of culture and meaning, like our consumption of culture and meaning, influences our sex/gender systems. In turn, our sex/gender systems influence our production and consumption of culture and meaning (Stimpson, 1981, p. 59).

Dress: Dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body. Dress, so defined, includes a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other

categories of items added to the body as supplements (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992, p. 1).

Clothing: Refers to any tangible or material object connected to the human body. This definition encompasses such items as pants, skirts, tops, and other related body coverings.... Clothing, then, applies to those objects that we obtain (by buying, receiving, or constructing) and attach to or wear on our bodies (Kaiser, 1990, p. 5).

For the purposes of this study, **homemade clothing** refers to any clothing that is constructed at home for non-commercial purposes. It may be worn by the constructor, or by a recipient who has not purchased the clothing (e.g., a son, a daughter). **Home dressmaking** will refer to the processes of planning and constructing homemade clothing.

Review Of Related Literature

Meaning and Home Dressmaking

The Role of Dress in Identity Construction.

Burr (1995) notes that "identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw on in our communications with other people" (p. 51). Discourses, defined as "set[s] of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events" (Burr, p. 48) are evident in the texts of society which include books and other written media, but also include conversations, images, buildings and clothing. For every object, event or person there maybe several different discourses, "each with a different story to tell about the object in question, a different way of representing it to the world" (Burr, p. 48). People actively construct their identities by accepting or rejecting various discourses (or parts of discourses) of age, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. that are present in a given culture at a given time.

One way that people express their identities is by positioning themselves in conversation. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) refer to this as social positioning and describe several ways in which individuals position themselves and others. In first and second order positioning, a person positions herself or another in conversation (first order) and then may have to renegotiate this position if it is questioned (second order). Performative positioning is second order positioning that takes place "within the conversation with the person who has positioned another person in the first order" (Given, 2002, p.133). Accountive positioning occurs when second order positioning occurs with a third party, (such as when a home sewer says to a friend, "She said I always wear the same dress, but I'm not ashamed of what I have"). Moral positioning refers to the idea that people's positions can be understood through the roles they play in society such as a nurse or a teacher. Personal positioning is the positioning of people "in terms of their individual attributes and peculiarities" (Van Langenhove & Harré, p. 22). Self and other positioning refers to the idea that when one positions oneself in a conversation, one automatically positions the person being talked to in relation to the self (and vice versa). There are both tacit and intentional positioning. Most first order positioning is tacit, but

behaviours such as lying or teasing can involve intentional positioning. Positioning of oneself and of others can be either deliberate or forced, depending on the conversation that is taking place.

Social positioning theory is "most readily understood as centering upon the replacement of the metaphorical notion of "role" with that embodied in the word "position," with much of its insight and use flowing outward from this initial point of theoretical intervention" (Luberda, 2000, p. 2). Removing people from the static positions and relationships that "roles" imply (such as "mother-son" or "teacher-student"), the concept of "position" conveys a much more "fluid and dynamic sense of the multiple "selves" or "identities" one has, and also how these are…actively constructed, in conversations between people or in other discursive contexts" (Pinkus, 1996, p. 1). Recognizing that people choose which positions to occupy (rather than simply than assigning them to fixed roles) gives an entry point into understanding women's subjectivity and agency, "shifting the focus away" from the idea that women are "merely functioning under the control of social structures and practices" (Pinkus, p. 2).

Dress can be used to reinforce one's position and identity, both for oneself and for others. Several authors have described ways in which people have used dress to position themselves. Arthur (1998) found that new sorority pledges subscribed to the idealized image of a, "fashionable, classy, thin, tanned, feminine, well-dressed and (often) blonde" (p. 88) young woman both to tell the outside world and themselves that they were sorority members. As one sorority woman expressed it, "You're surrounded by Beta symbols, and then you are a Beta" (Arthur, p. 91). Young Hmong women in the United States prefer a new style of traditional dress (rather than the traditional style of traditional dress favoured by older generations) because it better fits with their positions as American girls (ideally tall and slender) than with the traditional Hmong value of women as hard-working child bearers (Lynch, Michelman & Hegland, 1998). Suthrell (2004) found that many male transvestites like to dress in women's clothing because it embodies typically feminine qualities (such as soft, yielding, elegant, tasteful). Wearing women's clothes allows them to position themselves as women, validating feminine aspects of their own personalities that they feel are despised when they dress as men.

Arthur (1998) states that, "appearance management is a process used to negotiate identity and manufacture selves" (p. 85). When the appearance cannot be managed to match how one sees oneself, an individual can feel at odds with herself and with others. Church (2001a) recalled that wearing the "distinctly feminine outfits" (p. 372) sewn by her mother made her feel conflicted when she tried to reconcile this clothing with her own identity as a tomboy. When Viola Carter (cited in Silverman, 1984/1998) was a new immigrant to Alberta, her grandmother made her a school dress that was quite different from clothes of the other Alberta school children. Carter believed that this dress made her "backward" and unable to "do anything the other kids did" (p.118). Similarly, Nenga (2003) found that young women who were unable to wear clothing that matched with the image they wanted to project to their peers due to poverty or parental disapproval, felt shame, anxiety or anger.

The reasons for the feelings expressed by Church, Carter and Nenga's study participants may be related to results of research (e.g. Tseelon 1995; Guy and Banim 2000) which suggest that women identify very strongly with their clothing, so much so that their sense of self and self-image on a day-to-day basis are very closely related to what they wear. Tseelon found that individual women's positive or negative self-images were related largely to how they perceived themselves in their clothing. Guy and Banim identified three main images women had of themselves, which were mediated by their clothing. These images were, "1) the woman I want to be, 2) the woman I fear I could be, and 3) the woman I am most of the time" (p. 316). The women in their study were very aware of using their clothing to create, disclose and hide aspects of their personal identities. As identities shifted, they were integrated into how women dressed and presented themselves. Arthur (1998) also found that as sorority women came closer to graduating, they became less invested in the sorority image and more willing to change their appearances as they tried to determine who their newly graduated selves would become.

Banim and Guy (2002) found evidence that clothing women kept but no longer wore was also tied to the construction of personal identity. Kept but unworn clothing (e.g., an old concert t-shirt, a pair of pants that no longer fit) acted as a reminder of past selves, but also provided symbolic links between women's past, present and future

identities. For example, some items of clothing reminded women of who they once were, helped women to define who they were not, or even who they did not want to be.

Home Sewing, (Material) Culture and Identity.

Studies exploring meaning in homemade clothing and textiles have identified links between home sewing, culture, and identity. Katahan (1997) studied the dowry textiles her mother made as a young woman in Greece. She found that in addition to revealing her mother's aesthetic choices, technical abilities and the materials that were available to her, the dowry textiles reflected "the options that were available to her, the choices she made, and the reasons underlying these choices" (Katahan, p. 92). The production of these textiles signalled Katahan's mother's desire to be seen as a "nikokyria", a designation of high status in her community, meaning a woman who keeps "an organized and efficient household" (Katahan, p. 72). As objects produced within a cultural and temporal context, the textiles can be read as embodying her mother's conscious decision "to take on the cultural values that were held in high esteem by her community" (Katahan, p. 94).

Church (1998) studied a collection of wedding dresses made by her mother Lorraine Church in a small Alberta community over a forty-five year period. Despite the time span over which the dresses were constructed and the fact that each dress was made in close consultation with the bride to express each bride's "self" as she perceived it at the time, Church (2003) found striking similarities among the gowns and the brides' narratives that accompanied them. She noted that the majority of the dresses were "conspicuously simple" in style, exemplifying the qualities of "modest sexuality and low maintenance femininity," which she argues are characteristic of "a cultural repertoire that is collectively shared by women in small town and rural Alberta" (Church, 2003 p.19/20). The women who worked with Lorraine Church to design their wedding dresses revealed their cultural values through their expression of "self" in the gowns that they constructed.

Tulloch (1999) argues that the freestyle home dressmaking method practiced by mid-twentieth century Jamaican women gave them the ability to express their cultural and aesthetic selves after they emigrated to Britain. Their design skills allowed them to

adapt fashionable British styles to reflect their Jamaican sense of aesthetics, enabling women to combine British dress codes "with their own idiosyncratic inflections that advocated their cultural values, their 'coloured-ness', their 'Jamaicanness'" (Tulloch, p. 122). Although the changes were minor to the uninitiated eye, within the British Jamaican community they expressed a collective cultural identity.

Dressing well and looking respectable were other themes repeated in studies of the meaning of homemade clothing to women in the early to mid-twentieth century. Moseley (2001) argues that notions of respectability have historically been based on (white) middle-class notions of acceptable femininity. Certainly Tulloch (1999) states that the clothing designed by Jamaican women in Britain was meant "to be *seen* by the British public as respectable" (p. 120). Burman (1999b) argues that "keeping up appearances" was necessary for Edwardian women, as appearance was closely tied to social standing and respectability. Home dressmaking was one way for many women to acquire appropriate clothing on a budget. Moseley found that British working class home dressmakers in the 1950s and 60s adopted the images of film stars like Doris Day and Audrey Hepburn who personified middle-class femininity. They used their sewing skills to make outfits similar to those worn by their favourite stars that otherwise would have been unaffordable.

For some women, the very act of sewing was tied to respectability. Katahan's (1997) mother maintained her respectable status in her village and was deemed worthy of marrying Katahan's father because she stayed home and sewed rather than "going out" and risking losing her reputation.

Women's narratives show that it was possible to be subversive through dress while maintaining the aura of respectability. Sarina de Bruijn King (cited in Church, 1998) characterized the use of puffed sleeves on her wedding dress as an act of freedom and rebellion. Gwen Nickel (cited in Church, 1998) described the choice of a sweetheart neckline on her wedding dress as risqué. Still, these were wedding dresses worn in rural Alberta weddings without creating a stir in the community. Likewise, Anella James and her contemporaries could adapt British fashions to speak to (and of) their "Jamaican-ness" while still appearing respectably dressed to the British public (Tulloch, 1999). Through home sewing, women have been able to literally construct their personal,

cultural and feminine identities. These studies show that the clothing and textiles they created could contain strong personal meanings while reflecting and/or subtly subverting mainstream ideals.

Interpretation of Meaning in Sewing and Homemade Clothing.

Studies that looked at motivations for home sewing during this period (e.g. Schofield-Tomschin, 1999) found that although aesthetics and creativity were important motivations, economics was the primary reason that women sewed at home. How the act of sewing and its products were interpreted could depend on how strong the economic necessity for sewing was. Those who had no choice but to rely on a family member's sewing to clothe them could view the products of that labour unfavourably. Burman (1999b) found that during the early years of the twentieth century, "clothing which was known to be homemade" was an "unwelcome badge of poverty" (p. 37) for the British poor. Tulloch (1999) reports a stigma among Jamaican men against wearing clothes that were obviously homemade. Although Margerum (1999) remembered the joy of sewing her own clothes as a 1950s teenager, her mother, who had survived both the Depression and the "Make Do and Mend" campaigns of the Second World War did not enjoy sewing. She considered working outside the home to afford store bought clothes a better use of her time.

Those who did not sew or wear homemade clothing due to abject necessity could interpret sewing and its products very differently. Women who viewed their skills as giving them the opportunity to express themselves creatively or to acquire attractive clothing that would otherwise have been unaffordable took pride in their sewing, and could feel empowered by it (see, for e.g., Burman, 1994; Church & Church, 2003; Gordon, 2004; Hackney, 1999; Moseley, 2001; Szeless, 2002).

Many researchers who have investigated issues around meaning in home dressmaking have done so through family connections. Perhaps this is because, as Buckley (1999) argues, "home dressmaking can provide a context for exploring family relationships, after all it is an activity in which women learn and teach each other skills which form their feminine identities" (p. 59). Others argue that the rejection of sewing is

a way in which women reject specific feminine identities. Church (1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) grew up in the 1950s and 60s and subsequently rejected what she saw as her mother's traditional feminine identity, that of "a woman who exemplifies loving service to home, family and community" (2001a, p. 373). Sewing was a large part of this identity, and was discarded in favour of "travel, schooling and career" (Church, 2001a, p. 373). In interviews with British women who sewed in the 1920s and 30s, Hackney (1999) found that those who perceived sewing as representative of "a prescriptive and limited ideology of femininity" (p.74) did not enjoy the activity and avoided it when possible.

It seems evident that the meanings that women apply to the act of sewing and its products are shaped by their personal experiences and "social, cultural, institutional and economic contexts"(Hackney, 1999, p. 73). As women's self-images and personal identities are closely tied to clothing, the ways in which women interpreted the meanings of sewing and homemade clothing influenced how they viewed themselves when wearing those clothes. To date there have been no studies examining how Canadian women negotiated their personal identities through homemade clothing on a day to day basis. This study proposes to investigate how some Alberta women understood these daily negotiations and the meanings that they stitched into the garments that they sewed.

Changing Times: Alberta in the 1950s and 1960s

During the post-war period, Alberta was a society undergoing a great number of changes. When oil was struck at Leduc in 1947, the majority of the province's population was rural. Declining farm revenues, a stagnating population and no obvious prospects for industrial development suggested that the province had "reached [its] zenith and [was] destined to decline" (MacGregor, 1981, p. 286). Oil changed everything.

The discovery at Leduc was followed by other oil discoveries around the province throughout the next two decades. Huge natural gas deposits were also discovered and extracted. New jobs fuelled by the oil and gas industries became available in the cities, and rural Albertans moved in to fill them. Post-war immigrants and refugees also poured into the province: "political refuges from central and eastern Europe, and thousands of German, Dutch, Scandinavian, and British immigrants who sought better economic

opportunities" (Palmer, 1990, p. 304) as well as Portuguese, Greek and Italian immigrants. Between 1946 and 1966, European immigration brought approximately 185,000 to Alberta, many of them settling in the cities (Palmer, 1990).

This immigration, combined with rural migration and a minor influx of American oil company employees made Edmonton and Calgary two of the fastest-growing cities in North America, increasing their populations from slightly over 100,000 in 1946 to over 400,000 in 1971 (Palmer, 1990). By 1961 almost 70% of Albertans were living in urban centres (Palmer, 1990). Many people moved into new suburban developments and by 1961, 45% of all Canadians living in cities lived in the suburbs (Prentice, Bourne, Brandt, Light, Mitchison & Black, 1996).

Oil and gas brought prosperity to the province, which, along with immigration and urbanization, brought "a more consumer-oriented society, permeated by American popular culture" (Palmer, 1990, p. 300). Manufacturers were producing a whole range of consumer goods such as dishwashers, cars, refrigerators, and televisions and advertising them to Canadians. This did not mean that they were immediately available to all Albertans. Oral history evidence suggests that into the 1950s, many rural western Canadians did not have electricity in their homes (Blashill, 1997). In the late 1950s, one woman from Vimy, Alberta wrote to *Chatelaine* magazine that as a farmer's wife, she "hadn't even running water" (cited in Korinek, 2000, p. 82). However, thanks to Diefenbaker's sale of western wheat surpluses to China and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, farm incomes rose dramatically, enabling rural Albertans to participate in the consumer society (Morton, 1997).

Canadian women had been strongly encouraged to enter the workforce during the war, to take up the places left by men, and to supply the goods required for the war. However, at the war's end, it was expected that women would return to their "natural" places in the home, as wives and mothers. This in fact became the overwhelming ideal of the 1950s woman. The media stereotyped women as happy homemakers, devoted to meeting the needs of their husbands and children. Betty Friedan (1963/1983), author of the best-selling *Feminine Mystique*, characterized the image of the 1950s suburban housewife as

> freed by science and labour-saving appliances, from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfilment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of (p. 18).

Many 1950s women accepted this role. Harvey (1993) suggests that against the backdrop of upheaval from the Second World War and the new insecurity of the Cold War, young people were interested primarily in safety and security, which a return to traditional gender roles and the safe haven of marriage and family seemed to offer. Whatever the reason, marriage rates soared in Canada in the years immediately following the war, especially among younger women (Prentice et al., 1996). Birth rates rose from 20.1 per 1000 inhabitants in 1937 to 28.9 in 1947 (Prentice et al., 1996). Birth rates for married women under 30 continued to climb until 1956 (Prentice et al., 1996).

Despite this trend, women, especially married women, entered the workforce in increasing numbers. The growth of overall job opportunities in Alberta led to an increased number of job opportunities for women, especially in the service and clerical sectors (Palmer, 1990; Prentice et al., 1996). Prentice et al. suggest that the new consumer society and higher standard of living may have affected many married women's decisions to enter the work force. To purchase the cars, refrigerators and televisions "which most Canadians now considered essential, and to ensure access to higher education and better health care for their children, many married women had to augment family income by taking on paid employment" (Prentice et al., p. 351).

Women also increased their participation in post-secondary education during this period. While in 1960, women comprised 32.2% of Canadian undergraduate students, by 1970 they represented 37% of full-time undergraduates, although they were concentrated in traditionally female programs such as home economics and nursing (Chalus, 1993; Prentice et al., 1996).

Prentice et al. (1996) stress that it is important to be aware of:

> the gap that existed between what women were told they should do and what women actually did. The very vigor with which the "happy homemaker" image was promoted by the media may well have been a reaction to women's growing

> involvement in activities outside the home and, in some cases, their resistance to conventional heterosexual roles (p. 384).

Certainly by the early 1960s some women were openly questioning the narrow roles prescribed for them in Canadian society. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, perhaps the best known treatise against women's limited roles, was first published in 1963. However, Korinek (2000) and Prentice et al. both found editorials linking sex-role stereotyping to "married women's domestic work and paid employment, and to the dearth of women in public life" (Prentice et al., p. 384) published prior to this in *Chatelaine* magazine.

The 1960s are widely remembered as a time of social change and upheaval. Historians (e.g. Granatstein, Abella, Acheson, Bercuson, Brown & Neatby, 1990; Morton, 1997; Palmer, 1990) argue that Canadian youth did not find as much to protest about as their American counterparts, though they did "agitate in support of native peoples and the poor" (Granatstein et al., p. 480) and the Pearson government's acceptance of nuclear weapons in Canada and American involvement in Vietnam provided fuel for Canadian anti-war activism. Most of this activity was centred around university campuses and some of it took place in Alberta. Palmer (1990) argues, however, that Alberta was largely exempt from many counter-cultural movements such as beatniks and hippies, both due to the province's relative isolation and the conservative nature of the population.

Regardless, a growing women's movement was making its presence felt across the country and the province. Young (primarily white, urban, middle-class) Canadian women's experiences of sexism in the student protest movements of the decade spurred them to participate in consciousness-raising groups, protests and marches characteristic of the women's liberation movement (Prentice et al, 1996). Some established formal organizations designed to help women, such as the Calgary Birth Control Association and the University of Alberta's Mothers on Campus (Chalus, 1993; Palmer, 1990). Other women began to take notice of the differences between their experiences and the gender ideologies that did not change to reflect realities (Palmer, Prentice et al.). Palmer argues that while most Alberta women would not have considered themselves "feminists" in the mid- to late-1960s, they were becoming increasingly aware of issues of inequality.

Women's organizing around these issues of inequality led to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, established in 1967. At the same time, many Alberta women, particularly older, rural or small town women and those belonging to conservative religions, maintained their traditional social and political beliefs (Palmer, 1990).

Against this backdrop of change, Alberta women sewed for themselves and their families. How they viewed the meaning of their home sewing and the clothing they made was influenced by where and how they fit into this social, political and economic milieu.

Women's History and Museums

Portrayals of Women in Museum Exhibits.

> Until recently, the telling of Canadian history has focussed mostly on the economic and political origins and character of the francophone and anglophone communities – commonly designated the two founding nations – and on the winning of nationhood.... Many historians, assuming that the kernel of Canadian history lay there, chose to concentrate on a small number of males of European origin whom they identified as the critical pioneers, leaders, and trendsetters.... It was taken for granted that this view of the past included all that was truly important about Canada and Canadians. Left in the shadows were native peoples, non-charter ethnic groups, geographical areas outside central Canada, the inner lives of Canadians, most members of the working class, and almost all women (Strong-Boag & Fellman, 1991, p. 1).

Although in recent decades feminist research has brought women's history to the fore and has made it a legitimate and recognized field of study, museums have been slow to break away from the more traditional view of history described above. Reviews of exhibitions in history, technology, science and natural history museums in countries such as Canada, the United States, Israel, Scotland, England, Sweden and France over the past two decades have revealed an androcentric bias. Women have been found to be secondary to the storylines in museums across these international and disciplinary boundaries. Feminist museum professionals (e.g., Porter, 2004; Mayo, 2003; McCullough, 2003; West, 2003) continue to call for changes to museum practice that will make room for women's history.

In a review of exhibits at the Museum of the Diaspora in Israel, Izraeli (1993) found women almost completely absent from the displays of Jewish life, even family life,

of which they are traditionally considered the centre. Studying representations of women in British museums, Porter (1987, 1988, 1991) found that male-centred storylines were predominant in history and technology museums. Mayo (2003) cited several examples of exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution where women were present only and "blatantly" as sex objects (p. 114). Women appear in exhibits not because their history is felt to be inherently interesting, but as "supporting cast members... incidental to the main action (Diethorn & Bacon, 2003, p. 96). Read's (1996) case study of the Canterbury Heritage Museum found women appearing in exhibits almost "by accident" and then only in roles related to reproductive, rather than productive, work. In a discussion of ethnography as practiced in Swedish museums, Lundgren (1994) argues that masculinity is presumed to be the norm, and women and femininity are subsumed "under domesticity and kinship or, in some cases, under the heading 'Sex Roles'" (p. 346). McCullogh (2003) notes that when Parks Canada designates historic sites, sites that reflect women's history are often overlooked because, "most women's work has traditionally been unpaid, hence undervalued and not considered to be a national historical importance" (p. 341).

Chabot (1990) and Shoemaker (1994), looking separately at representations of women in natural history museums in England and the United States, both found that exhibits reinforced traditional ideas about male and female roles. In exhibits depicting the evolution of hominid species, The British Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History/National Museum of Man and the Field Museum of Natural History all used images of men to represent the stages of human development. While little is known of who used early tools, or of how human relations were structured in early cultures, depictions of early societies at all three museums reflected the androcentric bias of current Western cultures. In museums depicting pre-history, ancient recorded history, and animal life, family groupings were depicted as nuclear families, further reinforcing a modern Western "norm." (see Chabot, 1990; Read, 1996; Shoemaker, 1994).

Although some of the above reviews are over a decade old, this does not necessarily make them irrelevant. Permanent museum exhibitions are often designed to last from ten to fifteen years, meaning that storylines implemented in one decade can survive well into the next or beyond. For example, the exhibit *Wild Alberta*, which was

recently unveiled at the Royal Alberta Museum, replaced the Habitat Gallery which was originally installed in 1968 (Herzog, 2003). In 2003, I acted as a consultant to a small cultural museum that had not changed its displays since they were originally created in the 1960s. As a staff member of the Alberta Museums Association in 2004, I visited twelve community museums. Six of these museums had exhibits identical to those pictured in promotional brochures that had been in the Association's files for at least a decade. Four had been in operation for less than five years. Only two of the twelve museums regularly rotated their exhibits (approximately every 6 months to 1 year for temporary exhibits).

This situation is not unique to Alberta. Museums across Canada contain old exhibits, meaning that ideas current in one decade can remain on display as "the truth" long after they have been questioned or contested in other venues. This is in part due to finances, as "cutbacks at all levels—from operating grants to education and community outreach programs—have meant that many museums are facing critical shortfalls, and are unable to plan adequately for the future or to maintain facilities and collections" (Canadian Museums Association, 2005, p. 1). It is also due to the fact that many small community museums are run primarily by volunteer labour, and many volunteers have neither the time nor the training to undertake the research projects required to develop fresh, innovative exhibits.

Problematic Museum Practices of Collection and Classification.

The marginalizaton of women and women's history in museums is tied intrinsically to the way that museums conceive of, collect and organize their artifacts (Kavanagh, 1994; Knibb, 1994; Porter, 1988, 2004). Curators rarely look at the whole material culture to choose representative artifacts; instead they collect what is available from those who offer it to them (Skebo, 2003). This presents problems when museums claim to represent "regional," "community" or even "human" history. Historically, the less privileged in society have made up the majority of the population. However, economic circumstances and need have meant that these people's everyday material culture has been used up. Museum collections can therefore hold only what has survived:

objects that were made for heavy use, or objects that were sentimental or symbolic to the owners (Knibb, 1994; Porter, 1988). These objects alone are not representative of people's everyday existence.

Although many objects from the home lives of working class men are extinct, museums may represent these men through the tools that they used in the workplace. Many of these tools have become obsolete, and because museum curators are interested in what has changed over time rather than what has remained the same, these tools have been collected (Porter, 1987). Although women have also worked outside of the home, women's work was often labour rather than tool intensive (e.g. servants, seamstresses). Tools for women's work were also often the same whether they were working domestically or for wages. Distinctions between women's tools are therefore difficult to locate or identify without specific provenance. Women's work has not been considered historically significant, so this information has not been collected (McCullough, 2003). This leads to museum representations of women's artifacts based on stereotypes, rather than on the actual histories of the objects.

Current artifact classification systems are also problematic (Knibb, 1994). The *Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing: A Revised and Expanded Version of Robert. G. Chenhall's System for Classifying Man-Made Objects* and Parks Canada's *Classification System for Historical Collections* are two systems used in many Canadian historical museums.[1] Both recommend single classifications for objects, "organized on the basis of the original function of the object" (*Vocabulary Standards*, 2002). Classifying artifacts through a system based on the object's original function attaches that single function and meaning to the object. Such systems do not make room for the multiple uses or meanings that objects become invested with over the course of their owners' and users' lifetimes. These uses and meanings can get lost, or at least remain hidden, because when searching for objects to use in an exhibition, only those that have been classified under the term the curator is searching for will be found.

For example, through my research I found that sewing machines meant a great deal more to women than simply being tools. Some mentioned that they kept old sewing

[1] They are listed first and second respectively on the Canadian Heritage Information Network's *Classification Schemes* website. (http://www.chin.gc.ca/English/Standards/vocabulary_classification.html)

machines as objects to be cherished. Machines can act as reminders of women who have passed away.

> Mom's had a treadle on it. In fact she passed away about two years ago and she was still using the same machine. I've got it now and I treasure it (Jeanne).

> And when I first started sewing on my own after I was married, I had a just a small portable that my grandmother had purchased for a wedding gift for me, and that little thing I carried all over the place. I still have it. I still have actually my grandmother's sewing machine that she had with a few missing parts, but its still with the old metal legs, you know the intricate ironwork on the legs, I have that (Dianne).

They could also symbolize generational connections between women that others outside of that connection might not understand.

> I always thought we should have kept my mom's old sewing machine, it was really old, but I don't know what happened to it. I left the farm and my brother I guess didn't worry about sewing machines and stuff like that (Helen).

Under current classification schemes, sewing machines would be entered under "Textileworking Tools & Equipment." A curator searching for objects that served as reminders might search for souvenirs, photographs or other objects that are classed as "Documentary Artifacts," but would be less likely to look under "Textileworking Tools & Equipment" because the connection is not obvious. Very important emotional ties between people and their objects can in this way become lost in the museum's filing system, and never communicated to the public.

Working Paradigm of Museum Professionals and the Role of Museums in Society.

Several authors have written about the evolution of museums and historic sites and the institutional framing of history within an empirical or positivist paradigm (e.g., Knibb, 1994; Lundgren, 1994; McCullogh, 2003; Porter, 2004; Read, 1996). Porter, herself a museum professional, argues that the "professional code" and day-to-day practices of the majority of her colleagues are based on "the premise of objectivity and neutrality, eschewing bias or influence" (p. 106). Given the positivist premise of museum exhibitions, "those who question the 'truth' of these representations of history on other

grounds than lack of evidence are often criticized for attaching subjective values to a previously "apolitical" history" (Read, p. 123).

Within the positivist tradition, exhibits are designed to demonstrate "progress", the superiority of the present over the past and the superiority of Western cultures over so-called primitive peoples (Knibb, 1994). Knibb argues that by their very existence, museums operating within this paradigm reinforce "a set of beliefs about progress, the quality of life, community norms, values and identity" (p. 357). This gives museums a specific function within a culture or community. Izraeli (1993) contends that the role of museums is to promote and maintain the status quo of ruling relations within society. As cultural institutions, museums create exhibits that are

> display[s] of reality, but…not reality itself. The displays as constructed reflect the specific reality of the experts as well as their strategic decisions concerning how to convey that reality through the exhibits (Izraeli, p. 516).

As we live in a society that privileges able-bodied white males,[2] museum exhibits reflect this "specific reality." Museums therefore function as sites of "cultural production and reproduction" and serve to pass dominant cultural ideologies from one generation to the next (Katriel, 1997, p. 676).

In this sense, women's history and museums are already at odds. While the purpose of women's studies has been emancipatory from the start, this has not been the purpose of museums (Lundgren, 1994). It is difficult to incorporate women's history into a traditional positivist framework. Women's history is not uncovered by plugging women

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[2] "In Canada, women earn an average of 72 cents for every dollar that a man earns. Female-dominated professions in general are valued much lower than male-dominated professions. Child care workers are paid on par with parking lot attendants, plumbers earn more than nurses. Men outnumber women in each of the ten highest paid occupations in Canada while women outnumber men in all but one of the ten lowest paid occupations in Canada. In both the highest and lowest paid occupations in Canada, women in these occupations earn less than men in the same occupation. For example, female food and beverage servers earn 76% of what male servers earn while female dentists earn 66% of what male dentists earn" (UN Platform for Action Committee Manitoba, 2003).
The Government of Canada recognizes that men and women in Canada do not yet enjoy the same status. According to *Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality* (1995) "Attaining gender equality demands a recognition that current social, economic, cultural, and political systems are gendered; that women's unequal status is systemic; that this pattern is further affected by race, ethnicity and disability; and that it is necessary to incorporate women's specificity, priorities and values into all major social institutions." Status of Women Canada, a branch of the federal government currently works to improve women's economic autonomy and well-being, eliminate systemic violence against women and children, and advance women's human rights (Status of Women Canada, 2005).

into pre-existing progress-centred conceptions of a male-centred history (Mayo, 1994). Studying women's history requires acknowledging that history is a construct, that there is no "truth" that can be objectively discovered, and that historians make "a deliberate selection, interpretation and presentation of the facts from a particular point of view" (Mayo, 2003, p. 113). This is not to say that there is no place for women's history in museums. Kavanagh (1994) believes that, "there is a glorious and untapped potential for museums to be positively subversive, poignant, and sharply relevant in the histories they create" (p. 372).

Museum professionals do not have to agree to be complicit in reinforcing and perpetuating androcentric ideologies. Westney, Brabble and Edwards (1988) define human ecologists as, "change agents who aid society towards a better understanding of human-environmental interactions" (p. 130). As researchers and interpreters of such interactions, museums can take on this role of change agent. Museums are educational institutions, which through exhibitions of the past can encourage people to think about what is happening in the present and about possible directions for the future. If museums are in fact going to act as a change agents and not just reinforce societal norms, museum professionals must look at their research, collecting and exhibiting practices and begin to ask questions about how these practices work to maintain the status quo.

Feminist Approaches to Museum Exhibits.

Feminist museum professionals and critics (e.g., Hasted, 1994; Kavanagh, 1994; Knibb, 1994; Livingstone, 2003; Mayo, 2003; Porter, 2004) have suggested several ways in which alternative histories could be (and have been) incorporated into museum exhibits. Suggestions include making women's perspectives the central frame of reference, actively collecting objects related to women's (and other marginalized persons') histories, not being afraid to use representative objects when "authentic" ones cannot be found, conducting primary research and oral histories (as much history that is already compiled reflects a male-centred bias), treating gender diversity as commonplace, acknowledging points of view and voices other than the curatorial voice, sharing power, consulting with diverse communities, emphasizing female defined areas of experience

such as housework or childbirth, and developing thematic or issue-based approaches to exhibits, instead of linear or chronological ones.

Personal narratives are rarely conveyed in museum exhibits (Church & Martindale, 1999). Yet it is often the personal stories from history that draw people in and make them want to know more. Exhibits that have used personal voices have worked because, "[m]any visitors…feel a greater resonance with regular people than with famous…heroes or celebrities" (Feibel, 1998, p. 28). While donating an object to the exhibit *Getting Comfortable in New York,* which featured period rooms such as a tenement kitchen and a 1950s-era suburban rec room, one woman commented, "I never realized I was part of history, too" (cited in Feibel, p. 29). Kathryn Church's exhibition of wedding dresses made by her mother Lorraine, entitled *Fabrications,* drew visitors who had previously not made connections between their lives and the work of the museum (2001b). Feminist exhibition practices are one way for museums to connect with wider and more diverse audiences. This is very important if museums are to continue to be seen as relevant and worthy of public funding.

Tensions remain around how to frame feminist museum exhibits. Buckley (1999) asked the question, "how can one write about the place and significance of [home dressmaking] within women's lives without merely replicating value systems that contribute to its marginalization?" (p. 55). One could easily replace the word write with exhibit. In creating *Fabrications*, Kathryn Church found herself "split in two" (Church & Church, 2003, p. 153) over issues like the colour of the text panels. Pastels were chosen because they were the colours of Lorraine's sewing room. However, a visitor asked if the colours were not, "re-feminizing rather than liberating these garments, and by implication, these women?" (Church & Church, 2003, p. 153). Kathryn (2001b) also found that Lorraine did not agree with Kathryn's feminist reading of her sewing. Kathryn defined her mother as a seamstress, supplementing the family income through her sewing. Lorraine rejected this characterization, identifying herself as "a housewife and a mother who sewed because she loved it, because she couldn't deny her creativity" (Church, 2001b, p. 250). Kathryn had difficulty with this rejection, and ended up writing their argument into the text, letting Lorraine speak with her own voice, disputing but not silencing Kathryn's (Church, 2001b).

Feminist Approaches to Oral History and Writing Women's Life Stories

Like much of women's work, dressmaking has often occurred anonymously within the home. Because it has been subsumed under the heading of "domestic labour" it has not historically been defined as valuable or considered "real" work. While there may be entries in personal diaries relating to clothing and home sewing, the majority of information regarding individual women's experiences of dressmaking and homemade clothes is stored in their memories and accessible only through oral history interviews.

Oral history provides a means of giving history a "human face" and of recovering "lost areas of human experience" (Taylor, 2002, p. 242). As a research tool for studying home dressmaking, Szeless (2002) argues that oral history enables researchers to "grasp the meanings and implications of home dressmaking" (p. 849) while Buckley (1999) states that oral history helps to place the importance of home dressmaking in women's lives in its social and familial contexts, rather than simply acknowledging it chronologically.

Oral history has proven particularly valuable for uncovering the histories of groups who have left few written records, such as migrant populations, aboriginal populations, working classes, the poor and women. Perhaps its greatest strength is that oral history can enable marginalized groups to challenge traditional concepts of what is historically significant by speaking of their experiences and how these experiences helped to shape their lives and, by extension, their communities (Gluck, 1996).

Feminists have struggled with how to interpret women's stories without appropriating their voices and experiences. This is a concern for feminist scholarship because power is exercised through representation and interpretation (DeVault, 1999). As the compiler and writer of women's stories, I have the power to include and exclude, to determine what is significant or insignificant. As one of my goals is to allow women to speak about experiences that *they* deem to be significant in a museum context where they are so often spoken about from another perspective, I am especially aware of this power. One way to mitigate this problem is by acknowledging my own voice and my role as a participant in this research. Kirby and McKenna (1989) affirm that to do so is to "change the traditional power dynamics or the hierarchy which tends to exist between the researcher and those who are researched" (p. 53).

A similar concern arises when attempting to apply feminist analysis to women's life narratives. A goal of feminist research is to uncover hidden power relationships. Making these relationships visible through the analysis and interpretation of women's stories has often resulted in their resistance to what they see as negative interpretations of their lives (Borland, 1991; Chase and Bell, 1994). Although my intention is empowerment, it is possible that participants in this study may disagree with my reading of their experiences. Borland suggests that while those we talk to do not necessarily have to agree with our analysis of their stories, discussing ideas with the interviewee or discussing misunderstandings before and during the draft writing process are ways to "sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research" (p. 73).

Method

Data Collection

Interviews.

As has been noted, home dressmaking usually occurred anonymously within the private sphere and has gone largely unnoticed even by researchers of women's history. However, the sharing of all aspects of women's stories and experiences is imperative to a holistic understanding of Canadian history and culture. Through the use of in-depth interviews, this study provided an opportunity to document the unwritten activities and experiences of women that would otherwise be lost forever.

Seidman (1998) states that:

> In-depth interviewing's strength is that through it we can come to understand the details of people's experience from their point of view. We can see how their individual experience interacts with powerful social and organizational forces that pervade the context in which they live and work, and we can discover the interconnections among people who live and work in a shared context (p. 112).

Another strength of qualitative interviews is that they allow individuals to tell about their experiences in their own words, pointing to the issues and experiences that they believe to be significant (Given, 2000). As a goal of this study was to allow women to share their stories and experiences without the imposition of someone else's view of what was significant, providing this freedom to speak was very important.

Miller and Crabtree (1992) define semi-structured interviews as, "guided, concentrated, focused and open-ended communication events that are co-created by the investigator and interviewee(s) and occur outside the stream of everyday life. The questions, probes, and prompts are written in the form of a flexible interview guide" (p. 16). I chose this approach because semi-structured interviews provided similar information enabling me to make comparisons among the interviews, but also gave me the freedom to delve deeper into potentially unanticipated conversations initiated by the participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) note that researchers intent on their own objectives tend to use strongly structured question sets, whereas those interested in interaction and collaboration tend to ask people to tell their

stories in their own way. In this project, which had the goal of sharing voice and stories, a less structured question set seemed much more appropriate.

Patton (2002) states that a general interview guide provides the interviewer with topics, issues or questions that need to be covered during the interview. I therefore developed an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions that had the intent of capturing information about the context of participants' lives in the 1950s and 60s as well as their thoughts on and experiences of home sewing during the period. The interview guide was modified slightly after the first few interviews. I changed it to incorporate topics that many women spoke about during these early interviews that had not previously been on the interview guide. As many women spoke about these topics, it seemed that they were significant experiences that should be included in all of the discussions (see Appendix D for examples of first interview guide and modified interview guide).

Fifteen Alberta women who sewed clothing at home for non-commercial purposes during the 1950s and/or 1960s were interviewed for this study. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling were used to find participants. Convenience sampling is defined as, "the selection of units from the population…based on easy availability and/or accessibility" (Joppe, www.ryerson.ca/~mjoppe/ResearchProcess/ConvenienceSample.htm). Although some critics (e.g. Patton, 2002) warn against the use of convenience sampling stating that it is "neither purposeful nor strategic" (p. 181), others argue that it can provide "fairly significant insights and be a good source of data in *exploratory research*" (Joppe, www.ryerson.ca/~mjoppe/ResearchProcess/ConvenienceSample.htm). Maxwell (1996) argues that in some situations convenience sampling is the only way to proceed. Examples where convenience sampling is useful include "attempting to learn about a group that is difficult to gain access to, or a category of people who are relatively rare in the population and for whom no data on membership exist" (Maxwell, p. 71). As there has been very little research done into women's experiences of home dressmaking in Canada, this study was exploratory in nature. Although it could be argued that home sewers of the 1950s and 60s were not rare in the population, there is no "membership data" available on where they are situated today, and as there do not tend to be clubs of home dressmakers, they are not easy to locate.

Participants were located through "word of mouth" via friends, acquaintances, co-workers and through the participants themselves. Although I had originally intended to interview between 10 and 15 participants, in the end 15 were chosen because "much research...places the point of redundancy (or the point of data saturation) at approximately 15 to 20 respondents" (Given, 2000, p. 84). In answering the question, "How many participants are enough?" Seidman (1998) states that "at some point...the interviewer may recognize that he or she is not learning anything decidedly new.... That is a time to say "enough"" (p. 48). My research included analyzing period literature related to home dressmaking and extant photographs and pieces of homemade clothing in addition to interviewing home dressmakers. With all of this information I judged that I had enough data to say "enough."

The process of finding research participants through convenience and snowball sampling meant that it was likely that I would find more women who had enjoyed sewing than women who did not enjoy it. Women who enjoyed sewing would be more readily willing to speak with me, and more likely to be recommended by friends or family as potential research participants. Indeed, all of the research participants identified themselves as women who loved to sew. This inherent bias of my sample was noted from the outset and taken into consideration during the process of analysis.

Interviewees were given the choice as to where they would like to be interviewed. The majority chose to be interviewed at home, though one chose her office for convenience. Two mother and daughter pairs participated in the project and the mothers chose to be interviewed with their daughters present because they felt more comfortable that way. One of these pairs chose to be interviewed in a restaurant located halfway between their homes. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1½ hours.

Interviews were conducted in person because a key feature of qualitative interviewing is that the researcher conducts interviews, rather than a third party distanced from the research questions (Seidman, 1998). Another reason for interviewing in person was that an intention of the research process was to engage in conversations with the participants. This would have been much more difficult over the telephone.

Interviews were videotaped because:

> to work most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text to study.... Each word a participant speaks reflects his or her consciousness. The participants' thoughts become embodied in their words. To substitute the researcher's paraphrasing or summaries of what the participants say for their actual words is to substitute the researcher's consciousness for that of the participant.
>
> By preserving the words of the participants, researchers have their original data. If something is not clear in a transcript, the researchers can return to the source and check for accuracy. Later, if they are accused of mishandling their interview material, they can go back to their original sources to demonstrate their accountability to the data....[R]ecording also benefits the participants. The assurance that there is a record of what they have said to which they have access can give them more confidence that their words will be treated responsibly (Seidman, 1998, p. 97).

Although the above goals could have been met through audiotaping, video was used so that (with the participants' consent) portions of the interviews could be used in an exhibit created from the data. Participants were also asked to share photographs of themselves wearing homemade clothing and extant pieces of homemade clothing with me during the interview in the hopes that having photographs and objects physically present would spark memories through sensory stimuli such as sight, smell and touch (Taylor, 2002).

Object and Archival Research.

Objects reveal details such as the maker's aesthetic preferences, technical skills and the materials that were available to her (Cunningham, 1988; Katahan, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Taylor, 2002). These details are important, as "visual, sensual and tactile qualities, proportions, texture, pattern, colors, shapes and techniques offer the researcher a broader understanding for interpreting a subject" (Cunningham, p. 78). The objects examined in this study included patterns from the 1950s and 60s belonging to research participants, patterns from the 1950s and 60s in the Clothing and Textile Collection at the University of Alberta, photographs belonging to participants and pieces of clothing made by participants in the 1950s and 60s.

Strong-Boag and Fellman (1991) note that, "a careful reading of [traditional sources] is frequently extremely revealing, if not always for plentiful detail on women's lives, then at least for assumptions, both explicit and implied, about women and their roles" (p. 7). Contemporary sources addressed to women provided insight as to what writers and editors considered interesting and important for women during the period, as well as providing contemporary names and descriptions of fashionable styles, fabrics and colours, how they were discussed and how this changed over time. Sources studied included women's pages from the *Edmonton Journal* (1950 – 1969), sewing features and advertisements in *Chatelaine* and *Ladies' Home Journal* (1950 – 1969), a number of sewing and clothing instructional manuals published between 1949 and 1969, and archival materials relating to provincial and regional Home Economics Associations, Women's Institutes, 4-H, and the Girl Guides. In addition to providing historical context, these sources provided a point of comparison with women's narratives of home sewing.

Chatelaine and *Ladies' Home Journal* were chosen as representative women's magazines because they were the magazines recalled most often by the study participants (each was mentioned three times). Many of the women stated that they did not read women's magazines during this period. Despite this, I felt that the magazines, especially *Chatelaine*, would provide insight into how home dressmaking was discussed within the broader context of Canadian society. As the two magazines were available in the University of Alberta libraries, I was able to look at every page of every issue of both *Chatelaine* and *Ladies' Home Journal* published between 1950 and 1969 to locate information about home sewing.

As the *Edmonton Journal* was a daily newspaper, looking at every issue published between 1950 and 1969 would have been too time consuming. An initial scan of the newspaper's 1950 and 1955 editions showed that overall there were few stories on home sewing, and that the majority of advertising related to sewing occurred in the months of March and August. Issues from the months of March and August were therefore looked at over (roughly) 5 year intervals (1960, 1965, 1969). Where columns about home sewing were found, the previous and following month's issues were also looked at to ensure that all of the relevant columns in the series were located.

The clothing and instructional manuals studied were located in the University of Alberta's Clothing and Textile Collection, the University of Alberta libraries, my own personal collection and were loaned to me by research participants. Archival materials relating to provincial and regional Home Economics Associations, Women's Institutes, 4-H, and the Girl Guides were located at the Provincial Archives of Alberta.

Analysis

Employing "Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)" (Johnstone, 2002, p. 45) I critically read interview texts, period textual sources, extant photographs and women's garments to uncover prevalent discourses of femininity and home dressmaking at play in Alberta in the 1950s and 60s. Although CDA is used as an umbrella term to describe, "a variety of overlapping methodologies…the controlling theoretical idea behind CDA is that discourse is one of the principal activities through which ideology is circulated and reproduced" (Johnstone, 45). Johnstone notes that, "the goal of CDA is often explicitly political" and that critical discourse analysts, "acknowledg[e] that science is never value-free, [and] begin as advocates of social change" (p. 45). The following section outlines how I critically approached my texts.

According to Seidman (1998):

> A…conventional way of presenting and analyzing interview data…is to organize excerpts from the transcripts into categories. The researcher then searches for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within those categories and for connections between the various categories that might be called themes (p. 107).

As I read interview transcripts and archival sources, I noticed common words and subject matter, similar experiences and similar stories, because "the repetition of an aspect of experience that was already mentioned in other passages takes on weight and calls attention to itself" (Seidman, 109). At the same time, I looked for stories that did not occur repeatedly or that were contradictory to other stories, to see how women's experiences differed from each other. Seidman notes, "the researcher has to try to understand [contradictory passages'] importance in the face of the other data he or she has gathered" (p. 108).

Having organized women's stories and information from period texts into thematic sections, I read the texts critically to identify and extract prominent discourses of home sewing and femininity. In reading through women's narratives and period texts, I looked for how women were represented, how women represented themselves and "instructions" to women about how they should behave. I also looked for stories that described whether or not women believed in or behaved according to these instructions. Once I had identified the discourses, looking at women's stories in relation to the discourses enabled me to contrast and compare them, "prob[ing] for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 603).

I was also able to "read" women's garments, photographs and patterns critically in relation to their own stories of home sewing. I asked questions such as, do women's photographs, garments and patterns "back up" what the women are telling me? When women's extant patterns and photographs seemed to tell a different story about her relationship to clothing than their narratives did, I read "deeper" into their stories to find explanations.

In addition to looking at themes, I employed social positioning theory to make sense of how women positioned themselves within and against prevailing discourses to construct their feminine identities during the 1950s and 1960s. As Harré and van Langenhove (1999) describe it, "the act of positioning …refers to the assignment of fluid 'parts' or 'roles' to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (17). I looked specifically at the ways in which women spoke of themselves and others to determine how they positioned themselves within the social, cultural, economic and familial contexts they were describing.

Voices in the research

> The things we look at happened, but what we present to you isn't ever the things themselves. We offer only recreated and edited versions of them, things seen through out eyes, heard through our voices, recast into our media. What we offer comes into existence in the editing, not in the happening (Jackson, 1988, p. 277).

At several places in this document I have written about the importance of acknowledging my own voice while ensuring that I make room for the voices of the participants in my research. I should note that while this thesis contains the voices of several women, the overarching voice belongs to me. Although several women shared their experiences with me, in the beginning I chose the research topic and in the end it was my decision to choose which stories would be included and which ones excluded. As Katahan (1997) notes, "the research process is a filtering process in which ultimately I, as the researcher, conduct, record, transcribe, translate, interpret, contemplate, arrange and evaluate the material I feel will convey [women's lives] through textual means"(p. 27).

The women who participated in this study were not powerless pawns in this process. They actively chose how to represent themselves to me. In response to my questions they drew on their memories and experiences, chose which stories they wanted to share and narrated and edited them for me in ways that they chose. Each woman consented to be identified in this thesis and in my exhibit, meaning that each one was aware that her name would be attached to the stories that she told. It is quite likely that knowing they would be identified to the pubic caused participants to edit themselves differently than they would have if they were promised anonymity.

Conversations with the participants showed me how much my personal interest influenced this study and the research questions I asked. My interest in home dressmaking is situated in my own cultural, political and temporal background, which is quite different from the background of the participants. I am from Ontario, having moved to Alberta only two years ago. I am at least 21 years younger than the youngest participant in my study, a child of the "free to be you and me" 1970s, raised to believe that anything I wanted to achieve was as possible for me as it was for my brother. I began sewing clothing in the early 1990s as a way of expressing a counter-cultural identity. This thesis is the result of my interest in how other women expressed their identities through clothing.

However, for many of the women I interviewed home dressmaking was not about identity expression, it was part of a larger sewing strategy. My questions reflected my experience, not theirs. Many of the participants made a point of telling me that they had sewn much more than clothing, perhaps as a pointer to what they considered important,

but also perhaps as chastisement for ignoring the context of their work. Being aware of the influence of my own experience enabled me to hear this and to recognize the relevance of women's overall sewing strategies to the construction of their identities, rather than simply discarding information that was not about clothing as "irrelevant" data.

While I cannot (and do not want to) control how women represented themselves to me, I am very aware of how I am representing them. Though I constructed the framework within which these women's voices appear, I also did my best to ensure that I presented their voices within that framework as accurately as possible. Working from the videotapes, I transcribed each interview within a day of its occurrence so that the experience would be fresh in my memory as I attempted to commit it to paper. I did not attempt to "interpret, condense, excerpt, and polish respondents' talk" as many researchers do to make it more palatable to an academic audience (DeVault, 1999, p. 75). I transcribed the tapes as closely to verbatim as I could, using "ungrammatical commas to indicate hestitation mid-sentence" (DeVault, p. 78), and including repeated words, unfinished sentences, laughter and "likes" "ums" and "you knows." The stories presented here are as close to the women's spoken words as I could create on the printed page, with words in square brackets inserted for clarity for the reader (if the speaker trailed off or was referencing an earlier part of our conversation). The main way that the narratives presented here differ from our actual conversations is that for ease of reading I have removed my own questions in this retelling of women's stories.

Validity, Reliability and Credibility of Study

Maxwell (1996) defines triangulation as:

> Collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods. This reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific method, and it allows you to gain a better assessment of the validity and generality of the explanations that you develop (p. 75-76).

Golafshani (2003) notes that "engaging multiple methods, such as, observation, interviews and recordings will lead to more valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities" adding to the reliability and validity of a study, reliability and validity being,

"conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm" (p. 604). As it is impossible to observe or record the past, object and archival research provided triangulation for the data in women's interview texts in this study.

Miles and Huberman (1994) note, "One of the most logical sources of corroboration is the people you have talked with and watched. After all, an alert and observant actor in the setting is bound to know more than the researcher ever will about the realities of an investigation" (p. 275). Given (cited in Jurkola, 2003) states that in addition to assessing data through triangulation and assessment of contextual materials, credibility in a qualitative research study refers to the need for the "description developed through the inquiry" to "ring true" to the research participants" (p. 51). One way of ensuring this is through "member checks" (Given, cited in Jurkola, p. 51). As the exhibit portion of this project was developed prior to the thesis, and was developed based on themes emerging from the analysis, participants in this study were invited to review portions of the exhibit text that pertained to them prior to its construction. At this point they were also invited to add anything to their stories that they had remembered after our conversations. Their comments and corrections were incorporated into the exhibit and the overall analysis.

Borland (1991) suggests that discussing ideas with interviewees or discussing misunderstandings before and during the draft writing process are ways to "sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research" (p. 73). In addition to commenting on the content of exhibit sections pertaining to them, participants were free to comment on the interpretation I was developing around their stories. I chose to give women this opportunity for the exhibit because the exhibit was a very public representation of them and I wanted to ensure that I got it "right" in their eyes.

The analysis that I employed in developing the thesis went much deeper than that of the exhibit, largely due to the natures of theses and exhibits. Participants were not asked to review sections of the thesis, partially because we had already discussed themes and representations around the exhibit text, but also because of my own thoughts on feminist research and interpretive authority. Some researchers "seem to reserve the label "feminist" for practice that is fully collaborative, giving no special power to the

researcher" (DeVault, 1999, p. 188). I am not one of these. I do not have "delusions of ceding interpretive authority" (DeVault, p. 190). Instead:

> I have in mind a voice that is thoughtful and self-reflexive. I imagine a voice that is not imposingly authoritative, but clear and personal – the voice of an author who invites others to listen and respond, aiming more toward dialogue than debate. My aim is to write about others *carefully*, in both senses of the word – with rigor and with empathic concern (DeVault, p. 190).

I have already acknowledged that while women's voices are strong in this thesis, the final interpretation belongs to me. Whether or not the participants agree with my interpretation of their stories, I have tried to be careful of them. I believe I have treated their stories thoughtfully and respectfully. I certainly have cared.

Research Ethics Board Approval

Approval for this study was obtained from the Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics Human Research Ethics Board as it involved interviewing human subjects.

An important purpose of this project was to record the voices of home dressmakers and with them women's identities, so that they and their work need no longer be anonymous. For this reason, people who did not wish to be identified were not included in this study. Article 3.1 of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (1998) allows provision for researchers to collect identifiable personal information through interviews, provided that that the free and informed consent of the interviewee is given. Participants gave their consent to be identified in the exhibit, the thesis and any resulting publications or presentations by signing two consent forms (see Appendix C): one consenting to participation in the study, the other consenting to participation in the exhibit. One participant was legally blind and could not read or sign the form. As per section 18 of the *Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics Human Research Ethics Board Application for Ethics Approval*, I obtained her consent by verbally asking her the questions on the consent form; she verbally responded to them. This exchange was videotaped with the participant's verbal permission.

As all participants gave their consent to be identified, their current names were used in both the thesis and the exhibit. (In some cases participants took on their husband's surnames when they married, in others they did not. Some participants are married for a second time and no longer use the surname they used during the 1950s or 1960s.) Photographs provided by the participants have also been credited to them under their current names.

Due to the public nature of theses, museums and exhibitions, the public has access to identifying data collected during this study. Confidentiality could not be guaranteed. To protect the participants all tapes and transcripts were kept in a locked cabinet during the research process. Through information letters and consent forms, participants were made aware that they could request that their interview (or portions of it) not be used in the thesis, exhibit or any resulting publications (see Appendix C for letters and forms). Participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on portions of the exhibit relating to their interviews before these sections were finalized in order to ensure that no breaches of trust had unwittingly been made. Copies of the exhibit text were mailed to them, and follow up telephone or email conversations were held to ensure that the participants were comfortable with how they were portrayed. Provisions for this review were outlined in an introductory letter and a letter of information given to each participant (see Appendix C for copies of these letters). (In the case of the blind participant, the content of the letters and the exhibit text were shared verbally per section 18 of the *Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics Human Research Ethics Board Application for Ethics Approval.*) No one other than the researcher had access to the tapes, transcripts or exhibit text before the interviewee had reviewed and approved the proposed use of their data.

It was unlikely that participating in interviews about the topic of home sewing would cause psychological harm to the participants. Evidence suggests that oral history interviews may have beneficial results, even when difficult or traumatic subjects are being addressed (Oral History Association, 2002, p. 2). Gluck (1996) notes that participating in an oral history interview can increase self-esteem, and can serve an important function in the aging process.

It was, however, acknowledged that talking about the past could bring up negative or unresolved memories, thoughts and experiences for the individuals participating. Participants were aware that they were under no obligation to answer questions that they were uncomfortable with and that they could stop the interview or withdraw their participation in the study at any time with no negative consequences. Had the need arisen, participants would have been provided with a list of appropriate counselling services if they experienced a further need to discuss or deal with their memories.

Following the interviews, participants were sent thank you cards expressing my appreciation to them for taking the time to speak with me and for sharing their objects and photographs with me. Participants were also invited to an exhibit opening during which they were publicly acknowledged and thanked for participating in the project. Light refreshments were served at the opening.

Boundaries of Research

This research addressed only how participants experienced home dressmaking and the meaning of their homemade clothes. While place and culture are obviously important to understanding the shaping of meaning and identities, in-depth histories of the regions the participants grew up and lived in were outside of the scope of this study. Similarly, external motivations and personal reasons for home sewing outside of how they related to the lives and experiences of the individuals in this study were not explored. Women who did not sew at home and their reasons for choosing not to sew were not studied. Many women sewed items other than clothing at home. This study focused on the clothing that was produced, and meanings that were interpreted in that clothing. Although purchased clothing may also have held deeply personal meanings, this research focused only on clothing produced at home.

The purpose of the exhibit was to provide an example of putting identified feminist exhibition techniques into practice. It did not propose to develop "a" feminist exhibition technique. Although active collecting was practiced, new knowledge of women's history developed and multiple artifact meanings portrayed, the development of new policy or classification systems for museum use did not result from this study.

The Many Meanings of Home Sewing in Alberta, 1950 - 1970

The Participants

The fifteen women that participated in this study ranged in age from the mid-50s to 94 years (see profiles of participants in Appendix A). Two distinct groups emerged from our conversations: those who sewed in the 1950s and 1960s, and those who sewed only in the 1960s. The majority of participants fit into the first group: four of the fifteen women sewed only during the 1960s. These four women were the youngest of the interview group, all were born in the late 1940s or early 1950s and learned to sew in the first years of the 1960s.

Fourteen of the fifteen participants were born in Canada. Ten of the participants were born in Alberta, three moved to Alberta from Saskatchewan, one from Quebec and one from England. There were no visible minorities in this group, and all spoke English as a first language. Most of the participants lived in the northern half of Alberta during the 1950s and 60s.

The Discourse of "Home Sewing"

In the post-war years, prevailing discourses of femininity rejected the public roles that women had taken on during the war and returned to quasi-Victorian ideals of modest respectability and selfless devotion to home and family. Sewing, as an activity that was done at home and demonstrated female industry and service to others, was easily positioned as an admirable feminine activity within this discourse.

> Home sewing is the most feminine of all the arts and crafts. It is an easy as well as a basic way for a woman to add to her femininity, whether she sews for herself, her children or her home. The woman who sews can be creative, make herself and members of her family attractive, and also stretch the family clothing budget (Mitchell, 1959, p. 1).

> It appears that women have not given up one of the most feminine of the arts and crafts.... Many women are beginning to realize that sewing is an easy and basic way for them to add to their femininity, whether they sew for themselves, their children, or their homes. It is an art where they can be creative as a woman, more attractive as a woman, and also stretch the family budget (York, 1961, p. 6-7).

Barnes (2004) notes that, "being positioned in a certain way carries obligations or expectations about how one should behave, or constraints on what one may meaningfully say or do" (p. 2). Harré & van Langenhove (1999) refer to this constantly changing system of expectations and obligations as the "local moral order." As can be seen in the above quotes, within the context of the moral order of the 1950s and early 1960s, women were expected to be "feminine," and "femininity" was expressed through the practice of three essential virtues: thrift, practical creativity and attention to appearance. As home sewing could be related to all of these, writers were able to morally position home sewing as not only inherently feminine, but as a way for women to increase their femininity through the practice of these virtues.

The themes of thrift, practical creativity and attention to appearance appeared over and over again in sewing manuals, Home Economics textbooks and women's magazines, and informed the broader discourse of "home sewing" in the 1950s and 60s. In many ways these themes are intertwined, however, they will each be explored separately in the following sections.

Although the local moral order is normally tacit, it can become explicit when a person questions the way that she has been positioned (Barnes, 2004, p. 2). A further section will explore the effect on the individual when this happens, which occurred when women began to question their rights, duties and obligations in the late 1960s.

Being Attractive as a Woman.

Through the post-war period, as in other decades, women were reminded that appearances were very important. In an era when the ideal of womanhood culminated in marriage and motherhood, young women were often advised on how to look in order to please and attract men. Home Economics classes brought the message to young girls and teenagers. Chapter 3 of the textbook *Your Clothes and Personality* (1949) focuses entirely on self-analysis. It instructs girls to "take a good look at yourself in a full length mirror" (p. 12) and answer questions about the flaws in their appearance. Some of the questions include:

Is your neck scrawny or nicely rounded?

Decide whether your nose is too prominent.

Do you have thick ankles?

Is your voice lovely to hear? (Ryan, 1949, p. 18).

The class activity at the end of the chapter instructs girls to study their flaws and figure out how to improve them. The punishment for not fixing one's flaws is spelled out clearly: "Many a pretty girl who wears lovely clothes has never been asked for another date because she looked sloppy" (p. 16).

Evidence that the battle against appearing unattractive would be a never-ending struggle follows in the book's closing chapter:

> You have now reached the end of this discussion concerning clothes and personality. How do you feel about it? Are you more satisfied with yourself? Or do some of you still feel as perfectly groomed as you did in the beginning? If you do, then there is absolutely no hope for you. You never will be well dressed.... Never become too satisfied with your appearance, because that will be a sure sign that you are losing ground (Ryan, 1949, p. 310).

Of course there were both a right way and a wrong way to dress. Girls were not to wear too much makeup or revealing clothing or boys would get the wrong idea about them. Good girls dressed within the confines of good taste. If clothing and accessories were not correct for the time of day or the occasion, a girl would display to the world her lack of taste. In order to help home dressmakers stay within the bounds of good taste, sewing manuals were full of helpful information about choosing a correct style for one's figure. This was not limited to helping home sewers choose flattering lines, shapes and colours for the clothes they were about to make. They also included tips on accessorizing and choosing appropriate clothes for different situations. These books are full of the rules for dressing so as not to embarrass oneself (and one's family) by appearing in the wrong clothes at the wrong time.

Having good taste also required paying special attention to grooming and hygiene. Advertisements in the 1950s reminded women over and over again about the perils of body odour, bad breath and blemishes. Although books designed for adult sewers did not emphasize the necessity of hygiene, in school curricula and community based sewing

clubs grooming seems to have been regarded as of equal importance to successful home sewing as learning how to make a straight seam or how to alter patterns for a better fit.

In 1950, members of the Sunshine Sewing Club in Falun, Alberta gave each other "hints on hairstyles", saw a demonstration on good and bad posture, and learned how to make cold cream. A project for the Alberta Women's Institutes Girl's Clubs in 1950 was "How to be Well Dressed and Well Groomed" ("Women's Institutes Girl's Club Report," p. 3). In 1954/55, the Worsley 4-H Sewing Club heard talks on "Good Grooming", and "Care of Underclothing" (*Girl's Club Annual Magazine*, p. 19). A "Worksheet on Sewing" used at Riverdale School in Edmonton in 1957 included a "Worksheet on Personal Grooming" and asked students to complete statements like "Hair should be washed _____ a week, or if it is dry, it should be washed _____ a month" and to "Write a short paragraph on 'Deodorants'" (Brindley, Stewart, Studholme & Swenson, 1951, p. 77). The following year's worksheet asked students to "Score yourself on 'GROOMING'" when evaluating the garments they had made in class (*A Workbook in Home Economics*, 1957 p. 74).

That dress and hygiene were considered of the utmost importance to a girl's success in life can be seen reflected in girls' and boys' activities at provincial 4-H rallies. In 1960, while boys had the choice of attending seminars on cattle and swine production, soils, crops, farm buildings and equipment or record keeping, girls could sign up for home nursing, "Party Fare" or "Styles and You" (*Farm Young People's Week*, 1960). At the 1966 4-H Alberta Club Week, while boys participated in a Career Exploration seminar, girls showed off their good taste at the annual Dress Review ("4-H 1966 Alberta Club Week Program"). A talk at the 1965 Alberta 4-H Girl's Club Rally was entitled "How to be More Beautiful" ("4-H Girl's Club Rally, September 25, 1965").

Advice on appearance was not just for unmarried girls. Married women were reminded that it was their duty to remain attractive to their husbands. Clothing designer Anne Fogarty (1959) authored a book devoted to the subject of *Wife-Dressing* in which she reminded married women that they must remain ever vigilant about their appearances.

> The most dangerous threat to successful wife-dressing is the triumphant cry, "I'm married! The battle is won!"

> To paraphrase John Paul Jones: "You have not yet begun to fight." The wedding ring is only the beginning (p. 10).

Sewing features in magazines reinforced this by leaving no doubt about for whom the home dressmaker was really sewing. In a July 1950 pattern feature, *Chatelaine* exclaimed, "He's bound to approve of his women when he sees mother and daughter – or big and little sister – dressed alike in pert, pretty fashions" (p. 56). In June 1959, *Ladies' Home Journal* patterns editor Nora O'Leary suggested, "Choose your most becoming colour (better still the one he likes best)" (p. 60). Remaining attractive after marriage was not just a choice, it was an obligation. "The mature woman has just as much right – indeed it is almost her duty – to be as fashionably dressed as a younger woman" (Lynch & Sara, 1960, p. 163). That women who knew their duty would be suitably rewarded was suggested in a Simplicity advertisement that read, "He loves the way we all look. And I'm getting an evening on the town as a reward!" (*Chatelaine*, November 1959, p. 103). By reminding home sewers of the presence and prominence of men in their lives, these writers used moral positioning to reinforce women's obligations as wives (or future wives) and objects of the male gaze.

While it is likely that married women who sewed in the 1950s strove to make clothing that their husbands would appreciate, there is little evidence in women's narratives that this was their primary concern. Rather than accepting their prescribed positions as passive, unquestioning objects of the male gaze, women were more likely actively choose fabrics and styles that they liked themselves. Sometimes these choices could even run counter to their husbands' expectations:

> Lois G: Well for one thing it was the first red dress I had ever had, and when I went and bought the material my husband, I come home and my husband says, a red dress? And I said yes I'm making a red dress.

Likewise, the sheer volume of material written instructing women on how to dress tastefully, coupled with statements such as "The homemaker often makes the mistake of wearing old clothes to do her daily tasks" (*McCall's Step-By-Step*, 1966, p. 8) and tirades against women wearing pin curls to go shopping suggest that many women were not following the rules so painstaking laid out for them.

Although women's magazines in the 1950s did publish fashion information and comment on fashion in articles about home sewing, they were much more likely to focus on the economic benefits of classic styles and good quality fabrics. Similarly, women who sewed clothing in the 1950s did not describe themselves as being fashionable. While they generally hoped that their clothes were in style, more important than being fashionable for these women were comfort, fit and looking nice. Using accountive positioning, Ruby rejected the characterization that she was "well dressed" in favour of being seen as "comfortable, clean and respectable."

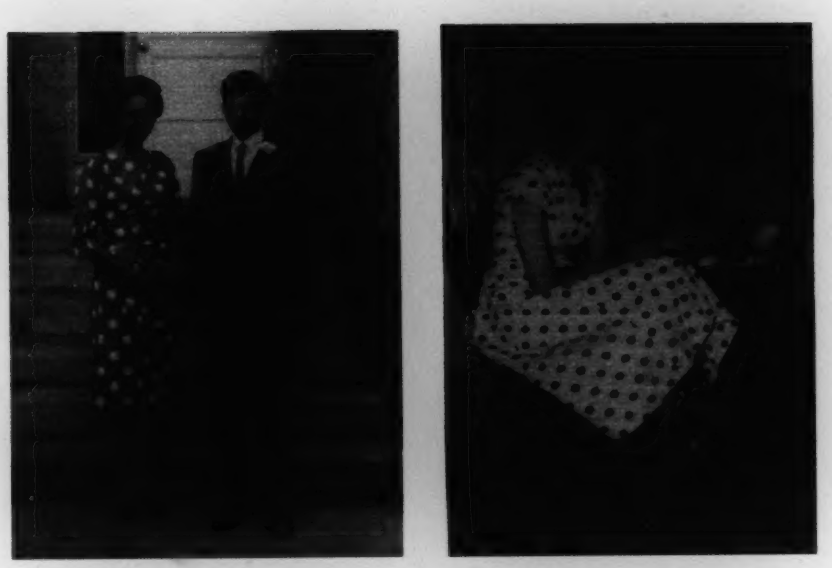
> People seemed to think I was well dressed but I don't know. I felt comfortable shall we say, I didn't think I was a fashion plate at all, never figured I was. I was clean and respectable and that was the main thing.

Anna considered:

> To me [clothing] was just something I liked and it was practical. It served a purpose to me. That was about it.... They were comfortable. They were. And I thought they looked very nice, I thought they were flattering to the female figure.

Interestingly, of the five patterns that Anna loaned me two were Vogue Paris Originals and one was a Vogue Couturier Design, high-end patterns designed by actual haute couture designers. This would seem to suggest that on some level at least, Anna was quite fashion conscious. Yet according to the first order position she took in her narrative, Anna was not interested in fashion at all. On the surface there appears to be a discrepancy between Anna's account of herself and the material evidence.

However, Anna's Vogue patterns share the same straight, classic lines that are evident in the other patterns and clothing that she loaned me. It is possible that Anna chose these patterns because the designs appealed to her, because she knew that they would be well designed and that she had the skill level to make them, rather than because they were high fashion designs.



Figures 1a & 1b. Anna Duncan wearing dresses that she made. Left, 1962. Right, 1958. Photographs courtesy of Anna Duncan per signed consent form.

Figures 2a & 2b. *Vogue* patterns belonging to Anna Duncan. Photographs by Marcia McLean.

By positioning themselves as women who was not interested in clothing beyond its practical and comfortable appeal, Anna and Ruby placed themselves in line with the cultural values of Albertans. Church (2003) found that the majority of women who wore dresses made by her mother in Lacombe, Alberta considered themselves to be plain and simple women. The majority of women with whom I spoke also positioned themselves as "plain" or "simple" when it came to clothing.

Gordine: I don't know they were just clear-cut, classic um, somewhat plain, I preferred the plain style rather than frivolous type things you know.... You can see that there are some very basic, mostly basic or... but then that suited me.

Lois G: Simple I would say. The sheath dresses were in style for a long part of this time, but as I said the dresses were all no waistline and so you didn't have to worry about whether it was exact or not...

Norma: Oh we thought [our homemade clothes] were lovely. I, within reason, I think mostly we felt good in them, so within wide parameters yes, sure [they were fashionable].... My own choice is classic styles, I much prefer a garment that is going to be acceptable for a number of years, um, trendy things, that's fine for the kids but I suppose if you look over the things I've made over the years for both the children and myself that those are classic styles.

Cathy: Oh, that it was so, it's again the construction technique, like it's very simple, which suits me, I have since found out that I have Mennonite roots and it does answer why I don't wear jewellery and I always wear just turtlenecks and wool pants like I, I'm always dressed very simply, usually underdressed for the occasion. Um, but I liked how simple the clothes were then I liked that it required exquisite sewing to achieve the result and they're simple and they're not frilly and you know, they suited me.

Ruby: Well, I don't think I went out on a limb on anything at all. It would be moderate. Cause I never have been one to go off the deep end.

Church (2003) argues that the cultural heritage of western women informs their identities as plain and simple and the value that they place on informal, comfortable clothing. Westward migration in the 19th and early 20th centuries freed women from "parental discipline, church hegemony and mid-Victorian moralism" and enabled them to set aside conventional feminine dress for "pants, hats and pistols" (p. 15). However, the

conservative political climate of Alberta, shaped by "commerce and evangelism" (p. 8) fostered a common no-nonsense, modest femininity in the province's women. Clothing and patterns loaned to me illustrate these qualities. Most of the dresses and patterns have very straight, simple lines, are not very revealing, and were made in muted tones of solid colours. The dresses Church's mother made were also mostly simple, conventional and conservative, reflecting what she calls "a cultural repertoire that is collectively shared by women in small town and rural Alberta" (2003, p.19/20). My interviews with Alberta women and their remaining garments, photographs and patterns suggest that urban women shared this cultural repertoire as well, at least during the 1950s and 60s.

Although the younger women in this study also described themselves as plain and simple, they expressed more interest in fashion than the older group did.

> Marliss: We pored over the *Seventeen* magazines and then created designs that were like the ones in the magazines.

> Cathy: Well, I did read the fashion magazines like *Seventeen* and stuff, Edmonton was much, much more of a backwater in those days, there was a huge fashion lag in terms of what was available in the stores, at least as far as I could tell.

This change was also reflected in women's magazines of the decade. Beginning in 1963, the emphasis of the *Ladies' Home Journal* "Gem of a Wardrobe" sewing feature changed from speaking about clothing in terms of being classic and long lasting to focusing on qualities such as versatility and mix and match for the fashionable wardrobe. At the same time, the *Ladies' Home Journal*'s pattern features moved from focusing on "regular" readers (e.g. O'Leary, June 1952; O'Leary, July 1952; O'Leary, November 1954; Hart, December 1958; Hart, February 1960) and began to look more like fashion features, starring models and actresses (e.g. O'Leary, December 1963; O'Leary, September 1967; O'Leary, January 1969) or recognizably upper class locations such as Ascot Heath or debutante balls (O'Leary & Norman, December 1960; O'Leary, Winter 1964). As North American women became more affluent they could aspire to live the "good life." Those who became teenagers in the early 1960s had not experienced deprivation and shortages through the depression and the war like their mothers or grandmothers had. They could afford to take an interest in trends and attempt to keep up

with ever evolving fashions, especially as those fashions became more directed towards a teenage audience.

One concern with appearance that is unique to home dressmaking is what sewing manuals referred to as "the homemade look."

> There is a difference between "home-made" and "hand-made." Home-made refers to a poorly made or a hurriedly made garment. Hand-made refers to a garment made carefully and skillfully. A hand-made garment is also termed *custom-made* (Wilson, 1955, p. 116).

There is no doubt that having clothes that looked homemade was undesirable. Every sewing manual made reference to it and several recent authors have commented on the stigma attached to homemade looking clothes. The potential problems of home dressmaking are summed up by Gordon (2004):

> One photograph of a young woman, probably from the 1910s, betrays the difficulties that home dressmakers faced. Her dress has wide vertical stripes that do not quite line up at the waistline, and telltale wrinkles indicate an imperfect fit. Whoever made this dress wisely chose a simple style, and surely did her best, but the result was distinguishable from ready-to-wear clothing (p. 50).

As more high quality mass-produced consumer goods became available through the twentieth century, they became the standard against which homemade products were judged (Prentice et al., 1996, p. 127). Home sewing manuals through the 1950s and 60s consistently stated that home sewn clothing would be of higher quality than mass-produced clothing and teachers demanded high quality sewing from their students.

This meant that many women did not enjoy the formalized process of learning to sew. Jean, who took a sewing course at university when she was training to become a home economics teacher, intensely disliked the project made in that course because it was too picky and took too much time.

> The dress that we had to make in the course at university, I think we spent too much time on it. I was so tired of it by the time and, if I wore it once afterwards, that's all I wore it. I, well, it was sort of an example of how everything was to be done, and we just spent so many hours on this and uh, and I never liked it. I think when I sewed I cut it out and I got busy at it you know, I didn't take weeks upon weeks to do something because you, you lose interest.

Gordine enjoyed sewing and made many of her own clothes, but she did not enjoy her junior high home economics classes.

> It was quite picky I felt, it was just very difficult to sit through the lessons and then I fought with the machine, it was a treadle machine and I'd never used one… I think it was a treadle, maybe it was electric but anyway it was it was not much fun.

> I didn't take Home Ec in high school. You know very often it is part of the course but I didn't take it, I didn't like it.

Lois L. took a sewing course from the District Home Economist in Edberg. While she appreciated that the Home Economist's fussiness helped her to become a better sewer, she also thinks that it made her too critical of her own work. Recalling a suit jacket that she made for her husband, Lois said:

> I did sew, I made him a suit jacket after I took that sewing course and I shouldn't tell you this but, every time he wore that, it was beautiful, beautiful material, every time he wore that thing I picked it apart because I thought it didn't fit right. But it did. And so eventually I just got rid of it because every time he wore it I found something wrong with it.

Cathy enjoyed the attention that her grandmother paid to her sewing to ensure that she did things properly, but in hindsight she is confused about her experiences in Home Economics. While showing me one of the coats that she made in high school, Cathy said:

> The thing that amazes me about my sewing from this period, since I [later] sewed for a living, and I did tailoring, so it was quite fine, good work… my sewing from this [high school] period, I think because of my youth is really really good, like very precise and fine and stuff and I didn't get good marks in Home Ec. I did pretty well but I didn't get excellent marks so I wonder what the standard was. And I have, I saved my sample of different methods of doing the bound buttonhole from Home Ec and I considered it my Home Ec diploma cause I never graduated from Home Ec, I left right after two years cause I couldn't stand it anymore, and I don't see what was wrong with my sewing especially compared to what I did as a professional that was more than adequate, I did have a good reputation as a fine sewer, so this, these stitches are too big but I mean, look at this for heaven's sake, that little attachment.

Having looked at other examples of Cathy's sewing from high school and university, I also wonder what the standard was. Her stitches are tiny and even, all of her raw edges are overcast. I have rarely seen such fine hand sewing in garments made in the era of the electric sewing machine.

Figure 3. Sample of Cathy Roy's overcast seams on dress made in high school Home Economics class. Photograph by Marcia McLean.

Figure 4. Bound buttonholes on a coat made by Cathy Roy, 1969. Photograph by Marcia McLean.

This emphasis on perfection obviously stemmed from teachers wanting their students to do things properly, which would enable them to make clothes that were of high quality, that would fit well and that the students could take pride in. These considerations would have been particularly important in the early 1950s when many of the synthetic fabrics we take for granted today did not yet exist and tools designed to make sewing easier were expensive and thus out of the reach of the average woman. Most of the women I interviewed recalled using treadle or hand-cranked sewing machines with no special features other than (perhaps) backstitching. Many did not even have electricity until well into the 1950s, meaning that an act as simple as pressing seams was time and labour intensive. Unfortunately, the emphasis on perfection also seems to have undermined some women's confidence and made others cease to enjoy the process of sewing.

Some professional Home Economists recognized that this could become a problem in the early 1950s.

> Is there need to re-examine the standards set for students' achievement in construction of garments for class assignments? Some teachers proudly say they do not teach short cuts; that to use them means "letting down standards." Are some standards unrealistically high, based on "ivory tower" attitudes instead of an understanding of present-day time pressures?
>
> If standards of technical achievement conflict with human values the latter must win (Monroe, 1953, p. 649).

By the 1960s, ideas about taste were beginning to change, especially amongst the younger generation. Standards of dress were relaxing and youth and ethnic fashions were taking over from the more formal styles that had been high fashion in the 1950s. Sewing and clothing manuals that I examined did not acknowledge the relaxation of clothing standards or the new trends in fashion. Routh (1993) notes that by the late 1960s, denim was very popular for young people, especially "creatively patched, embroidered and appliquéd jeans. Young women wanted to be seen as doing their own thing" (p. 136). A pristine perfection was not part of this aesthetic. Still the authors of *Clothing for Moderns* (1969) criticized the aesthetic based on older standards of good taste.

> Most women of today…should use better taste in choosing stitchery projects than they do. Poor quality of handwork on a modern dress is just plain dowdy. Many

> imported so-called "handmade" blouses are in this category" (Erwin & Kinchen, p. 535).

This failure of clothing and sewing teachers to change with the times was going to become problematic for some young women. This will be examined more closely in a later section.

Stretching the Family Budget.

The first half of the twentieth century saw a shift towards a consumer-oriented society in which it was a man's role to earn money and a woman's role to spend it. Women were expected to spend money wisely for the benefit of the entire family. Thrift and intelligent consumerism were considered essential feminine values, and as such were part of a girl's training for her future role as a wife and mother. Home Economics textbooks relayed this message:

> By intelligent buying you are able to increase the standard of living for yourself and your family. This means that by shopping wisely you save money and you will have that money to spend for "extras" which otherwise you must do without (Wilson, 1955, p. 2).

Mid-century promotional material for the Canadian Council of Girl Guides stated that through their programs "the girls of today are being prepared mentally, physically and morally to fulfill the duties that lie before them as the home-makers of tomorrow" (Canadian Council of Girl Guides, 1941, p. 4). Sewing was posited as an important skill for girls to learn, as "sewing and mending teach thrift and may lead to a useful and enjoyable hobby, as skill is acquired" (Canadian Council of Girl Guides, n.d., p. 20).

Advertisements for sewing machines and fabrics in women's magazines stressed the connection between home sewing and economy. A Singer ad in the February 1950 issue of *Chatelaine* read, "Dress beautifully and cut clothing costs in half. You can do it with a NEW SINGER sewing machine" (p. 26). In 1951, a Tex-Made fabrics advertisement stated, "Yes, mother knows how to keep the family well dressed – yet stay within her budget" (*Chatelaine*, January 1951, p. 57). Several articles also stressed the message that sewing was a way to dress well on a budget. Between 1952 and 1962, *Ladies' Home Journal's* pattern features commonly had titles such as "Penny Pinching

Ideas for Summer" (O'Leary, June 1952), "$50 Spring Wardrobe" (O'Leary, March 1954; O'Leary, February 1955; and O'Leary, February 1957) and "The Journal's Wonder Dress to make Under $10.00" (O'Leary, January 1955).

The language of thrift and economy figured prominently in the narratives of women who sewed through the 1950s. Alberta in the 1950s was not yet a prosperous economy. In the years following the war, commodities prices became less stable as the cost of living increased and wartime shortages continued. It was necessary to use and reuse household items as long as possible (Major, 1993, p. 5). Thrift was a survival strategy for many families. Many women, both urban and rural, found themselves having to sew.

Women spoke of remodelling old clothing, reusing flour and sugar sacks, purchasing remnants from the catalogue and purchasing all of their materials on sale as well as sharing or trading resources such as patterns and old clothing in order to stretch their budgets and clothe their families. That remaking or remodelling clothes was a fairly common practice into the 1950s is evidenced in sewing manuals that include chapters on how to remake or remodel old clothing (e.g. Wilson, 1955; Lynch & Sara, 1960). Here again women were reminded of the benefits of being thrifty.

> A woman who is adept at remodelling her clothes will get a great deal of satisfaction out of this type of sewing. Not only is there a saving in actual cash, but there is also a fine sense of accomplishment in having increased the life of a garment (Lynch & Sara, p. 218).

Many of the participants in this study noted that their families had limited financial means, and that they were required to sew because there was no other means of procuring clothing and other household textiles for their families. Some also suggested that it was expected of them.

> Lois L.: We couldn't afford to buy clothes, boughten clothes…
>
> Lois G: I guess you could say and uh, when the youngsters come along, it was expected of you to do sewing for your children.
>
> Nellie: Well mostly it was a case of saving money because you know, the dirty thirties were not long past and people saving anyways, it was, you could and home sewing of course was a lot cheaper than buying for the children what with, so that was really, really the main reason.

Gordine: I just couldn't afford to buy things, or I didn't think I could and fabric was reasonably priced, and it was just something people did. You just sewed and that was sort of a matter of fact type of thing.

Often sewing had to be fit into an already full schedule. Joyce farmed a quarter section near Hattonford, Alberta with her husband and five children.

It was a, like a quarter section and we had a sawmill and planer, and then I had to look after the cows and the pigs and the chickens. I had 25 chickens and I used to feed them the scraps too from the table…and then I could sell a few eggs, not very many cause we used it mostly, have eggs, you know, instead of meat. In the summertime you had no refrigerators or anything….

And sewing, well we sewed everything there was that we could, curtains you know, out of flour sacks mostly, and dyed them, and traded you know things, if somebody had some clothes sent out then they could trade, each one from the other when one grew out of it, you know, you would give it to somebody else.

[Sewing] was usually in the evening because you were usually busy doing things outside in the daytime.

Rainy days you sewed. Rainy days, like, this friend of mine said, gee it's been a good summer for sewing, it's rained nearly all the time.

Lois L. described life on a farm near New Norway:

And it was a good life. It as a lot of work but when the kids got older they helped with harvesting. Big garden always. We canned a lot of vegetables and fruit and, and you didn't think anything of it because it was kind of expected that you would do that, and all your friends did that too.

Oh I think I had something on the go most of the time. And when I had the little kids around I sewed an awful lot at night. I would sew up to 2 in the morning or something to finish it.

Anna worked in a grocery store to help pay for music lessons for her three sons.

Quite frequently, there's many times when I, like I'd work through the day uh, come home and have supper and that and then I'd sew in the evenings, I was very fortunate in those days I didn't need much sleep. I could sew 'til 2 or 3:00 in the morning, get 3 or 4 hours sleep and get up, go.

Jeanne worked at a department store in Drayton Valley in the late 1960s.

I can remember when I first started to work I didn't have any clothes 'cause I had been at home then for just about 10 years and nothing to really wear and I'd sit up

> 'til 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning sewing myself a dress so I could wear it the next day but, it worked.

It is apparent from women's narratives that sewing was a very useful way to stretch the family budget. There are, however, stories within these women's narratives that suggest perhaps sewing at home was not such a "matter of fact thing," that even in times of economic stress, not all women would sew. Describing the general store at which she purchased sewing supplies in the early 1950s, Helen recalled:

> They had groceries on one side and I can remember they had material at the back, and they had a few clothing, it would be more like Work Wearhouse, it would be work clothes and that, but there would be a few ladies dresses there, because not every woman sewed, even then.

Joyce, who described great economic hardship on the farms around Hattonford, identified women in her community who did not sew.

> But some of the women didn't like sewing at all, and Mrs. Alton up there, she couldn't sew and then she'd want me to sew things for her too. She had three girls.... And I had to make with that little sewing machine, that little hand sewing machine six pair of pyjamas for those girls. I was getting awful tired of sewing... You didn't charge anybody, cause they couldn't pay you anyway.

Joyce's own sister did not enjoy sewing.

> And one of my sisters, I just had two sisters no brothers, the one youngest one, she loved to sew and she was really good at it but Norah, the other one, she didn't want to sew a bit, she would sooner be outside and do things. So I did a lot of her sewing when she was younger too. And mom's, of course.

In contrast to the other 1950s sewers in my study who estimated that they made between 50 and 90% of their families' clothes, Norma estimated that she made only about 25% of her family's clothing. Norma's primary source of children's clothing was trading back and forth with a cousin in Ontario.

> I was very fortunate, my mother sewed as well and knit for the children. Also I have a cousin in Ontario and over the years we each, well I had 4 daughters she had 3, and clothing boxes, and she had a son as we had a couple, but clothing boxes would get shipped back and forth. It sounds, with the cost of shipping now it sounds very unrealistic, but that's very true and so as each of us would get clothes given to us or made we'd add them to the box and ship them back and next time we would get a bunch of goodies plus things we had sent down earlier, so this made an enormous difference to clothing.... Um, because we had this supply rotating and people were good enough to keep adding to our supply. If we

hadn't had that give and take, I really don't know how we would have dressed the children as well as we did.

Norma's story, and the stories of other women embedded in these narratives show that there were some options for procuring clothing other than sewing for women who did not enjoy the activity. Women could choose how to spend their time to their own and their families' best advantage. Those who did not enjoy sewing or had other priorities could make choices around whether or not they were going to sew. There was room within social networks to make decisions and strategic trades that would also stretch their families' budgets and clothe their families.

This is not to say that there were not women who sewed despite disliking it, either due to economic necessity or societal expectation. It is quite likely that there were. The women in this study, however, unanimously identified themselves as women who loved to sew. Because they found sewing pleasurable, most were willing to spend their time doing it, even if this meant sacrificing sleep. However, rather than classifying this as selfish work (because it brought them pleasure), which would be decidedly unfeminine, women positioning themselves within the discourse of home sewing as feminine thrift could sew as much as they liked without being considered selfish or unfeminine.

A story that Lois L. told shows how even when economic circumstances had improved women could still resort to the language of feminine thrift to justify an enjoyable hobby.

> And then my sister-in-law and I took a course and we had to buy new sewing machines so we could zigzag and stretch stitch and stuff. Oh we made nighties and t-shirts and panties and we were gonna save lots of money but you know what? Our husbands took us all over Alberta for materials so we didn't save any money, but it was fun. Those were really good times.

A discourse in which women's sewing was indicative of their fiscal responsibility and resourcefulness gave women a tool with which to construct positive identities. The following stories illustrate how women positioned themselves and their sewing within this discourse.

> Joyce: And I made Sharon, what did I make it out of? Yeah that grey I made her a little coat dress and it was buttoned up the front with red buttons, and I didn't have enough for the sleeves, so I dyed an old flannelette shirt that was kind of worn and thin, I dyed it red and put red sleeves in it and a red

collar on it, put a little bit of stitching on it and red buttons down the front, and little red pockets. She looked cute in it. Just using your imagination and a little bit of time.

And then when my youngest one was born the sugar sacks, well I did have a pattern, or somebody had a little dress I think and I'd use a pattern of it, and it was the cutest little dress and it had two or three little pleats down each side you know, and a little round neck, and then it had some little flowers embroidered in the front, and little short sleeves, it was the cutest little dress, and she had that. Everybody loved it.

Jeanne: Like I said we were married in '59 and by 1962 we had 3 little children. Times were pretty tough. I wasn't working.

I had quite a few dresses that were going out of style, so I used the skirts and made little dresses for my daughter....

I can remember one little outfit that I made for Rita when she was about 2 or 3 years old. I made a blouse that had the buttons down the back and I put a ruffle with lace around and a ruffle at the sleeves and I had some black wool but it was very soft and I made her sort of a little jumper that was a skirt with a wide band on it and then straps up and across here and across the back and on that I put some braid, some red white and black braid I think it was and along the waistband it had the straps and it looked cute on her. That was her favourite outfit and she still points to that and says that's her favourite when she sees pictures.

Ruby: My husband was a teacher and not making much salary so I had to sew. I had to knit. I made everything.

I even made my husband a, my folks are Irish and they had sent some Donegal tweed as a gift and I made my husband a suit from a pattern, you know, and I went and I got the background for the collars and I bought the interfacing too, and it turned out very nicely. In fact, one of the teachers at school asked my husband, he said, "I've looked all over for a fabric like yours, where in the world did you get it?" And he says, "My wife made it." "Well," he said, "no wonder I couldn't find anything like it." So it turned out quite nicely.

In these narratives, women use first order and accountive positioning to show how their work was appreciated, both by their families and the larger community. Statements such as "everyone loved it," "that was her favourite" and "no wonder I couldn't find anything like it" show that the narrators' skills and resourcefulness were important to the social standing and emotional well being of their families. Without women's sewing the

families would not have had clothes of this quality (because they could not afford them), and would not have been as admired.

Women could also use the discourse of thrift to reposition themselves positively when others tried to use different parts of the femininity discourse (such as appearance) to position them negatively. Ruby related the following story:

> I think I had some dresses that were bought later on, but mostly it was homemade dresses. I remember my husband's mother coming to visit us, I had, well I showed you that picture of that plaid dress with the white collar, well, the one year I would wear, that was my best dress then you see, for afternoons, and then I'd wear it for a house dress the following year you see. We didn't wear slacks in those days you see. And so, and I was a little bit disgusted at my mother-in-law, she came one year to visit us and stayed a few weeks and then the next year she came back and met me at the door and says, "Oh, same old Ruby, same old dress." And I thought, oh, what a greeting I thought, my goodness woman.

Ruby worked hard to keep herself and her family well dressed, and resented the implication that she should have more, or perhaps better, clothing than she did. Rejecting this deliberate positioning of herself based on her appearance, Ruby used the language of economics to position herself in the first order as a woman who was satisfied with what she and her family had.

> It was what we could afford. I've never been envious of anything or anybody in my life. I knew how much money we had to spend and I did the best I could.

By the mid-1960s, prosperity and the standard of living had generally increased across North America. There was not as much need for thrift across the board as there had been in the previous decades, and articles about home sewing began to reflect this. As has been noted, the emphasis of the *Ladies' Home Journal's* sewing features focused less on durability and more on the fashionable wardrobe. Rather than focusing on "regular" readers the sewing features began to look like fashion shoots starring models and actresses. In the 1960s *Chatelaine* began to decrease its articles and segments on sewing altogether, perhaps reflecting a perceived decline of interest in home sewing, or the magazine's embracing of a new discourse of femininity under the leadership of feminist editor Doris Anderson.

Prominent discourses do not disappear overnight, however. A 1967 article in the *Edmonton Journal* read:

> "A woman who sews knows what to look for in manufactured clothing and becomes a wiser consumer," says Mrs. J. B. (Anna) Stewart, teacher of fabrics and dress at Strathcona Composite High School. "She'll examine the finishing, the materials, she'll have a better knowledge of fit, of line and colour" (November 3, Mark, p. 17).

In previous decades, girls had been taught that earning money themselves would diminish their husbands' (or fathers') dignity (Gordon, 2004). Instead of earning money to purchase consumer goods, good wives and daughters were to use their skills at home to create what was not affordable. Helen alluded to this role her interview:

> I think we [sewed] because it was, we felt that it was supplementing income, you know women didn't work, so we worked in the home, we found things that helped out that way rather than go to work and then buy it.

Although more and more women were entering the workforce, thrift was still considered a desirable feminine characteristic. Because sewing signified feminine thrift, it was positioned as an activity that could help women who worked outside the home retain their femininity. Thus, the manual *Sewing Made Easy* (1960) could confidently assume that women earning wages would continue to sew.

> The housewife is perhaps luckier than many women whose occupations take them outside the home in that the hours in which she can sew are not confined to one period of the day. She can usually arrange her housekeeping duties so that she has the time to make almost every item in her wardrobe. (Lynch & Sara, p. 185)

Ladies' Home Journal and *Chatelaine* both ran articles in the second half of the 1960s about career women who sewed. As the careers highlighted were fashion modeling and magazine writing, it is likely that these were understood to be glamorous careers rather than the types of jobs that most women would hold. That the women's sewing was written about in relation to saving money showed that even glamorous career women were at heart money conscious and therefore good, feminine women.

> Think of a top model who, you're convinced, spends her days buying whatever and whenever she pleases. And then… think again! Chances are she's an inveterate devotee of sewing too… (O'Leary, January 1969, p. 78).

An article about the home sewers on *Chatelaine's* staff read:

> *Chatelaine's* offices are graced with $410 worth of clothes for only $136. When you take the time and effort to sew for yourself, not only can you achieve a very

individual way of dressing, you can do so for ½ the cost" (Wilcox, August 1965, p. 31).

The younger women in this study who sewed only during the 1960s placed less emphasis on the economics of sewing than their older counterparts. Although most of them mentioned the economics of sewing, to them sewing represented something larger than a way of saving money.

Marliss: When I was little I used to draw dresses on cut out dolls and you would trace over them, get the shape and then use your imagination and create all kinds of things, well with sewing you could actually make them. And it was inexpensive you know at that time you were slim enough that a 45 inch piece of fabric would fit around you, so it didn't take a lot of fabric to make that basic shift, and then you could experiment with trims and rick rack and buttons and lots of things, so it was a really suitable style to begin sewing with.

Cathy: Oh it was always way cheaper, way cheaper to sew and that was definitely a factor I'm sure that's why my mother sewed for us and why I sewed for myself because you could, with a high enough skill level you could make anything you wanted right, and eventually because I made coats, right, I realized that I could make anything I wanted and fortunately I didn't have very glitzy taste so I could make anything I needed.

Susan: Yeah, just the pride of making something with your own hands I think and having different knowledge that you're never gonna find something the same as that.

Dianne: I think I liked, just the better fabrics and the nicer fabrics you could find. And I don't know what the, what the economics were, whether it was cheaper to sew or to buy, I suppose you know we could buy blouses maybe a little bit cheaper, but I always liked because you knew that they were going to stay together, and you could always pick your own fabrics cause a lot of times you didn't want to pick their colours or something.

When not constrained by finances, home sewing represented for these women the potential to create exactly what they wanted. The possibilities for women's creativity are explored further in the next section.

Being Creative as a Woman.

Historically, women have not been included in the category of "creative". Since the 18th century, narrowing conceptions and definitions of "art" and "creativity" effectively excluded women from both of these categories by defining genius as exclusively male (Jensen, 1995). "Scientific" arguments for women's intellectual inferiority in the 19th century seemed to prove that women did not have the intellectual capacity for originality and creation (Burstyn, 1980). Because much home dressmaking and needlework involve following patterns, they have not been considered creative in this traditional sense. Nevertheless, during the 1950s and 60s, home sewing was discussed as an appropriate medium through which women could express their creativity.

Aside from not being strictly "creative," sewing, rather than painting, sculpture or music, was an appropriate outlet for women because it channelled their energies into producing useful items for the home and family. Ignoring the fact that other art forms also produce tangible results, Hoffman (1958) counselled girls that sewing as a hobby would provide them with "something to show for your work and time, and... something to share with those you love" (p. 17).

Because home sewing was considered to be inherently feminine, there was often an assumption that any woman could do it. This was voiced in many articles and advertisements that suggested women did not require any skills or knowledge in order to sew beautiful clothes. Advertisers promised that their products contained all the knowledge that was necessary. A 1950 Simplicity ad read: "These Simplicity patterns have all the know how to make you and your pride and joy look cute and captivatin' from morning to night" (*Chatelaine*, July 1950, p. 56). A similar 1959 ad showed a woman insisting, "Of course, he thinks I'm pretty smart to be able to sew this well. But the truth is, anyone can sew practically anything with these marvellous Simplicity printed patterns" (*Chatelaine*, November 1959, p. 103). *Time* magazine proclaimed in 1958 that new products would make it possible for "even the clumsiest bachelor girl" to "sew professional looking draperies" ("Sew and Reap," p. 71). The article confidently predicted, "Soon sister Susie should sew a shirt in seconds" (p. 71).

However, like any other art form, home dressmaking requires a combination of knowledge, skill and talent to produce attractive, well fitting garments. The numerous books and articles published to help women in their sewing endeavours attest to this. For example, throughout the 1950s, *Chatelaine* ran a feature entitled "Sew and Save" every March giving the same basic information and techniques about how to cut, alter, fit and sew clothes. It was obviously felt that the continued repetition of this information was necessary for the benefit of their readers sewing at home. A proposal for the revamping of the Alberta 4-H Dress Review in 1968/69 also suggests that some girls did not easily master sewing skills. A reason stated for changing the Dress Review program was:

> To increase enthusiasm by offering another programme of interest to 4-H clothing club members. This programme may attract 4-H'ers who would otherwise leave the programme because of difficulties encountered in sewing techniques and skills (*Proposal for 4-H Dress Review*, p. 1).

Sewing manuals and magazines often referred to the "art" of home dressmaking and the particularly feminine opportunities for creativity and self-expression that home dressmaking afforded. Hoffman (1958) told sewers:

> The opportunities for expressing your own imaginative talents are unlimited – not just in finger skills (although this is important), but in colour, line, new uses for familiar materials, designing your own clothes and accessories, making your home and surroundings more lovely, and most of all, in pushing back the horizons of your own personal world. You'll begin to find some of the real rewards in pursuing what is truly a great art (p. 17).

Doerr (1967) appealed to her readers' design instincts:

> Because there is a little of the dress designer in every woman – the urge to create something, to express oneself, to be artistic and to find satisfaction in it. Clothes are one of the avenues through which a woman can satisfy this urge for self-expression. It's as feminine as intuition. The woman who makes her own clothes can enjoy the satisfactions of creating and having clothes that truly express herself (p. 1).

Turning the traditional concept of art on its head, Erwin and Kinchen (1969) proclaimed:

> Art is no longer only the ability to paint a picture; the focus is also on developing the ability to choose and assemble garments, accessories, and home furnishings displaying both creativity and appreciation. Intellectual and manipulative skills developed by practice can enhance one's imaginative abilities, so that one's choices evidence beauty and taste (p. 6).

This discussion of home dressmaking as "art" became more pronounced towards the late 1960s, reflecting a realization that many women were no longer sewing primarily for economic reasons. In 1960, the *Journal of Home Economics* published an article stating that home sewing needed to be repositioned.

> Although sewing for thrift is largely on its way out, there is a great upsurge of interest in creativeness, in the arts and crafts, in the do-it-yourself use of leisure time. Men have found outlets for such creativity in home carpentry, gardening, metalwork, and other crafts. For women, this same do-it-yourself desire can logically express itself through a renewed interest in sewing (Johnson, p. 753).

Jensen (1995) notes that in the post-war decades women were becoming increasingly interested in creating and shaping elite culture. "Art" in the context of elite culture in the 1960s included forms traditionally associated with men such as painting, sculpture and music. It did not include sewing or needlework. Therefore, the positioning of home dressmaking as "art" in the late 1960s by those with a corporate interest in sewing may have been part of a strategy to blur the link between traditional femininity and sewing to encourage women with more free time and an interest in the arts against abandoning it for more recognized art forms. Interestingly, in the 1970s, feminist artists and activists (i.e. Judy Chicago) used the argument that women's traditional forms such as sewing, knitting and embroidery were in fact art to embrace the feminine connection and to gain recognition for women's work and artistic contributions through the centuries (Chicago, 2005).

Despite the emphasis on home dressmaking as art and creativity, women were strongly cautioned about how creative they could be. Although "original ideas are trend-setting and to be encouraged" (O'Leary, September 1960, p. 60) women were constantly reminded that above all else they were to appear pleasing to others.

> An artist painting outdoor scenes creates an effect and gives the observer an impression. You, with your hair, face, eyes and figure use the tools of art principles to create the effect you wish to achieve and to elicit from your friends a pleasurable response (Mauck, 1963, p. 3).

There was a fine line between demonstrating "charm" and "eccentricity" through clothing, and women were advised to ignore it at their peril. *Your Clothes and Personality* (1949), a textbook designed for "girls of high school age" (p. v) reminded

them "it is the charming personality that really attracts you; not the person with the eccentric personality which seems to annoy you" (p. 3). Anne Fogarty (1959) cautioned her readers:

> If you've become addicted to dark stockings or tights, be careful not to look like a Charles Addams heroine. The "beatnik" bit is wonderful for sloppy, slushy days, but should not be allowed to take over (p. 42).

Unlike writers or musicians (perhaps the actual beatniks) who might attempt to evoke negative responses in their audiences, women were encouraged to be creative as long as they stayed within current norms of appropriate feminine appearance, and not to attempt to visibly subvert or reject those norms.

The opportunity to exercise their creativity was one of the most appealing aspects of home dressmaking to the women I interviewed.

> Jeanne: Creating. Challenging. I don't know, I guess I just like to see what I can do.

> Susan: I guess I enjoy the creativity, knowing that you made something…

> Jean: Oh the creativity I guess. It was always nice to finish something and wear it and know that it fit well and looked nicely and so on.

It has already been seen that the younger women in this study viewed home dressmaking as a way to engage their creativity and to produce garments that existed in their imaginations or that were more suited to their needs or wants than what was available in stores. Inherent to this notion is the idea of "individuality" expressed in the magazines.

> Bored with being carbon copies of their friends [these women] took up sewing to expand fashion horizons and arrive at a more individual look…. For all, a closet full of "originals." Best of all is the way you feel wearing one of a kind instead of one of hundreds (O'Leary, January 1968 p. 68).

As Susan remarked, it was important to know "that you're never gonna find something the same as that."

There was, however, another aspect of creative expression available through home dressmaking that came up in far more conversations than the idea of self-expression through personal style did. The majority of women I spoke to expressed

deriving much of their creative satisfaction from meeting the challenges that sewing posed for them.

> Dianne: I sort of liked the ones that had a little bit more to them, like you know putting in sleeves like more than just basic, so I sort of liked the ones that had were a little bit of different or complicated or had a little bit of a challenge to them.

> Jeanne: It was always, I just loved the surprise when [remnant bundles from Sears] came cause you never knew what you were going to get, it was just sight unseen.... It always worked out. I used just about everything.

> Jean: I made, well I mentioned about making a coat of mine over for our daughter, and she may have been six or seven I think and I just, it was a blue coat and I turned the material and I was very proud of it. That wasn't a case of not being able to afford to buy new. I had a very, very good friend who did a lot of sewing and I think there was a, I look back on it, a little bit of competition between the two of us. She taught school too. It was... she kept me going.

Outside of the literature specific to Home Economics, little attention has been given to practical home sewing as an outlet for women's creative energies. As has been noted, the use of patterns to produce clothing has removed it from the traditional understanding of what it means to be creative. The utilitarian nature of the objects produced may also have obscured women's creative involvement in the process of making them. However, it may also be because it was through the process of meeting practical challenges rather than through developing unique aesthetics that women tested their creative abilities. Buckley (1999) notes that looking at photographs of homemade clothes reveals them to be nothing special and in aesthetic terms, "rarely innovative, they were usually eclectic in design being copied from numerous sources and they were not normally unique" (p. 65). Period photographs of the women in this study show them wearing attractive but unremarkable, commonly styled clothing.

Figure 5. Roy family, 1967. Cathy (right) wearing homemade acetate dress. Photograph courtesy of Cathy Roy per signed consent form.

Figure 6. Lois Lindholm in homemade suit, 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Lois Lindholm per signed consent form.

Figures 7a & 7b. Gordine Thomson in homemade outfits, 1960s.
Photographs courtesy of Gordine Thomson per signed consent form.

Figures 8a & 8b. Anna Duncan wearing a dress made from Vogue pattern 1376. Photograph courtesy of Anna Duncan per signed consent form. Pattern photograph by Marcia McLean.

Figures 9a & 9b. Gordine Thomson (left) in dress made from *McCall's* pattern 5184. Pattern photograph by Marcia McLean. Black and white photograph courtesy of Gordine Thomson per signed consent form.

One photograph of Anna shows her wearing a dress made almost identically to the image on the pattern envelope. Gordine commented on how similar one of her dresses was in colour and pattern to the drawing on the pattern envelope. But looking only at this evidence provides a distorted picture of women's creative lives. As has been seen in the previous sections, many women had limited financial resources with which to purchase their materials for sewing. Women also wanted themselves and their families to be respectably well dressed within the norms of Alberta society. Meeting budgetary limitations and societal expectations often required a great deal of creative ability, from inspiration for the garment to the completion of the project.

Women found inspiration for clothing from diverse sources:

Ruby: Going through the stores looking at the things that were made, and taking a good look at them. Even looking at the insides, see how they were finished and that sort of thing.

Lois G: You saw it on somebody else…

Helen: Everybody got the Sears and Eaton's catalogue. And we would take ideas out of there, oh yes.

Lois L: I don't know just looking in the pattern book, and you know, what the kids were wearing.

It was not always possible for women to obtain patterns for the garments that they wanted. Often, women would mix and match pattern pieces, or adapt patterns to create the garments that existed in their imaginations. Several women learned to sew without commercial patterns at all, and only switched to them when they discovered that it was easier to use a pattern than to constantly reinvent the wheel. Some women sewed from basic patterns and embellished them from there. Doerr (1967) was clearly not familiar with the practices of many home sewers when she wrote that the new commercial patterns enabled a woman "to some extent be her own dress designer" (p. 1). Although women's designs may not have been strictly original, being based on images from catalogues, magazines and pieces of existing patterns, they were conceived of by women without formal training in clothing design or pattern drafting and put together with the tools that these women had available to them.

Marliss: I would adapt patterns, you know, share a sleeve from one pattern to another or a collar from one pattern to another. I made my younger sister's wedding dress, and we adapted that from a shirt pattern. It was a deep notched collar that crossed over and then buttoned on the side, so it was a very sophisticated shirt and we just extended it to a long coat dress and it was beautiful and trimmed it with a white braid, it was very smart. So that was the extent of my designing, I didn't ever draft patterns, we didn't learn that… now it was likely something that people studied in post-secondary tailoring courses and that sort of thing, but all of my sewing was done from patterns and adapting them with pieces here and there, and it worked.

Gordine (talking about her patterns): A lot of these are fancier dresses because I mixed and matched patterns, when doing things so I, I might like the top of this and the bottom of that and that's why they… I'd try to find one that had everything but it wasn't always [possible].

Helen: Sometimes we used to change patterns, take pieces from one and work make the other ones because you didn't want the same pattern all the time, and you could interchange parts of it and fix parts of it yeah, we have done that.

Jeanne: Yeah. I'd get a basic pattern and then just alter it to do whatever I wanted it to do.

Anna: Yes, once I started using patterns and found how easy that was instead of using old newspapers or brown paper I used patterns. I adjusted them a lot, and changed them around just, you know, sometimes I'd have an idea of what I wanted and I couldn't find a pattern and I changed it around a bit you know, but basically I used the patterns.

Not all women were comfortable mixing and matching patterns or making desired alterations. Four of the women in this study reported that they stuck to commercial patterns as the manufacturer presented them. Still, when mistakes were made with the patterns, their creative abilities could be very important. When one could not afford to buy new material, it was imperative to make a mistake appear to be intentional.

Lois G: I remember buying one pattern, and I forget what happened whether I cut the panel wrong or what…anyway I ended up, I had to uh, there was a panel down the side, I had to cut it in half, well not exactly, like two thirds and a third, cause I had done something wrong, and I thought well gee, if I put this seam across here and you know and this panel, so I covered it with buttons and put them on each end of it and that was it. Made it look like it

> belonged. I wasn't very good with designing, but that time I had to come up with something.

In addition to creative enjoyment, many women cited a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with seeing a finished product as reasons for enjoying sewing. In contrast with much of the other work performed by women in the home, when sewing was finished, it was finished. Housework by its very nature is repetitive with the same tasks such as cooking and cleaning needing to be done over and over again. Writing in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir compared housework to "the torture of Sisyphus":

> The clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present (Beauvoir, 1949/1964, p. 451).

In a chapter of *The Second Sex* entitled, "The Married Woman," Beauvoir wrote of women's oppression within marriage using the concepts of transcendence and immanence. Transcendent activities are those which produce something long-lasting, enable individual self-expression, transform the world, or in some way contribute to the constructive endeavours of the human race. By contrast, immanent activities merely perpetuate life or maintain the status quo. While it was men's lot to go out into the world and undertake transcendent tasks such as "discovering, inventing, exploring, studying, creating, writing and so on" (Veltman, 2004, p. 123), women were relegated to immanent tasks such as cooking and cleaning. These activities, though "necessary for the sustenance of life" are "immediately consumed, negated and brought to nothing but the maintenance of life itself" (Veltman, p. 123). While not all men were able to achieve transcendence (e.g. working class men), with a prevailing discourse of femininity that espoused domesticity and motherhood as ideals of womanhood, it was expected that all women would live in the sphere of immanence.

Unlike other household tasks, sewing had the possibility of being a transcendent activity. Anna stated why she found sewing satisfying:

> I just liked to see the end results you know, to me I always felt like I had accomplished something. I hate housework. I hate housework with a passion because to me its, its never done. No matter how clean it gets it always gets dirty. Now when you sew something, you've got to show for it when you're done and you can use it and you don't have to redo it.

Helen also enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment that accompanied sewing:

> I think it was uh, to accomplish something, to have something and see it last. You didn't want something that was going to fall apart as soon as you washed it or anything like that, so you had to learn to sew good. Or so that it would hold. Something I never did was sew quilts. I never do that because I just didn't enjoy doing that. Like there's too many little pieces together and all that sort of thing… There was no real accomplishment from my side.

To Cathy, sewing was not only a creative process, but also an intellectual one:

> I love the sensuality of it, the tactile moulding of fabric… I did grow up to become a custom tailor, I do love wools, and when you look at my fabric sample book you'll see how I could have fallen in love with wool, and wool is so malleable and responds to the steam iron and forming stuff so it's like sculpture and I love the feel of the fabric and I love the colours that are revealed when you put scissors to fabric… I really actually never notice all the colours in a piece of fabric until I cut it and then all the little ends come out and you can see the, oh there's turquoise in that or whatever. But it's a sensual experience and it's an intellectual experience because you have to be precise, and you have to know ahead of time what you're doing, its not like art where you just sort of throw something together, at least that's not how I sew, but there's a fair amount of creativity in deciding how it'll be assembled or working out details that you're not sure of, so I don't know, it's just, it's just nice.

As evidenced by women's narratives, sewing was a creative and intellectual process that resulted in a durable finished product. Though women may have had to sew several garments, each one could be different. They never had to make the same item twice in the same way if they did not want to. Although in the broadest sense women's home sewing may not have transformed the world, it did give women an outlet for creativity and self-expression that would have a lasting and tangible impact on their own self-esteem and the well being of their families. The garments that were loaned for *Patterns and Variations* are a testimonial to the durability of the products of women's home sewing. Through home dressmaking, women were able to step out of their immanent role, if only briefly, into the sphere of transcendence.

Divergent Discourses: Dress, Home Dressmaking and Feminine Identities in the 1960s

Nenga (2003), Tseelon (1995) and Guy and Banim (2000) have demonstrated that women's identities and positive or negative self-images are closely related to dress. Only one participant explored this connection at any length during our conversations, however her narrative of dress and identity conflict is so closely tied to home sewing and discourses of femininity that it needed to be included in this analysis. Cathy Roy came from a long line of needlewomen and grew up to become a custom tailor. Yet her relationship with sewing was interrupted in the late 1960s because the discourses of femininity and sewing prevalent in the Faculty of Home Economics where she was studying clothing and textiles did not mesh with how Cathy saw herself or her role as a female student at the university.

The purpose of this section is not to criticize Home Economics as an anti-feminist discipline. For much of the early twentieth century, Home Economics was a positive force for change in women's lives. A degree in Home Economics opened doors to women in many careers. Home economists played roles in the revitalization of agriculture and communities, added to knowledge about nutrition and child development, and were central to the growth of the consumer economy though their work in fibre science, design and consumer economics (Keating, 2001). Instead, this section is meant to illustrate how the positioning of home sewing and standards of dress as exemplars of feminine behaviour (in Cathy's case, within the context of a conservative Faculty of Home Economics) became problematic in the 1960s for young women who were trying to develop identities based on emerging notions of what it meant to be a woman in society.

Cathy learned to sew at the age of nine. She loved sewing and her Home Economics classes so much that it was her goal to become a Home Economics teacher.

> My father had gone to school with Elizabeth Empey, who was the director of the school of Home Economics in those days, and Home Ec had just built a new building in 1963 or 64, that brown one on the corner of 112th and 87th Ave, so when I was in grade 8 my dad arranged, I think that's the right date, now I'm not sure when the building was built, but that would have been about 1963/64, my dad arranged for Beth Empey to take me on a tour of the new Home Economics building, and it was then and there decided that I would become a Home Ec teacher cause I loved my Home Ec teachers and I loved Home Ec, and I had also decided right away to specialize in clothing and textiles and take a B. Ed after

> degree, so that was in grade 7 and I still had you know, 6 more years of school to get through. When I got there it was a much different story I'll tell ya, cause by then it was 1968, but that was my career goal.

Alberta in 1968 was somewhat different than it had been in 1963. Across the decade, new notions of femininity and appropriate roles for women were developing that did not propose home and family as women's only calling. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) was underway, brought about by women's political action, to examine the status of women in Canada and to determine how Canadian women thought their lives could improve. At the university, many students were taking note of the greater world and were becoming active in political movements such as the peace movement and feminism.

Not all women were interested in what feminism had to offer. A submission to the RCSW from some Alberta Home Economists read:

> Equality of the sexes in every aspect does not seem to be the sought after factor by most women, but rather a complementary situation where a woman can maintain her feminine qualities and role and still contribute according to her own potentials. We, as professional women, would like to picture, as an example, a woman who has some such qualities as the ability to be feminine without flaunting sex, of being decisive without being dictatorial, intelligent without being pretentious and of being instinctively considerate of other without thinking of it (Kucharski, Pritchard, Gillfillan, Findlay, Clark, Robertson & Zarkadus, 1968, p. 7).

Although these women were not advocating a return to traditional at-home roles for women, they were promoting a traditional discourse of femininity that extolled behaviours such as modesty, self-abnegation and service.

Cathy found this conservatism to be prevalent within the University of Alberta's Faculty of Home Economics. As a student interested in the political events occurring on campus, she found it difficult to reconcile what was happening in her classes with what was happening outside.

> It was not in tune with the time, like I had friends, part of the program was to take art and art history and philosophy and psychology, so I did meet other people and I found out about the political things happening on campus, I'd come back to class and most of the time I spent in Home Ec labs right, and so I'd say "Are you going to the Arts Teach-In on Thursday" and they'd go "The what?" And it was advertised all over campus and it was a huge thing it was a big "all students come and learn how the university is screwing up your life" or whatever, it was the big

> radical thing right, and nobody had a clue so it was just so out of touch, it's not like that now I don't think, there are way more social issues I imagine, but there weren't in those days at all.

In addition to the political ambivalence of her fellow students, a large part of Cathy's problem with Home Economics was related to standards of dress. The Home Economics standard was different from those of other faculties. For example, Cathy recalled being criticized for wearing jeans to her Home Ec classes, but receiving positive feedback from an Art professor for being the only Home Ec student in his class who did not "look like she was going to a tea party." While one professor saw Cathy's clothing inappropriately unfeminine, the other saw her clothing as appropriate to her position as a university student, regardless of the fact that she was a woman. These two very different positionings of Cathy based on the same behaviour (dress) reveal how the local moral order was shifting in the late 1960s. Though Cathy identified both as a woman and a student, given the obligations and expectations of each position, she found it difficult to dress as both at the same time.

Moseley (2001) notes that notions of respectability have historically been based on middle class notions of acceptable femininity. It appears that while notions of respectability may have been changing elsewhere on campus, the acceptable femininity being espoused in Home Economics was still a traditional one. An excerpt from a Home Economics clothing textbook published in 1969 certainly suggests this:

> A young modern has a clean-cut look. Her clothes, uncluttered by trimming, have enough decoration to give them distinction. They complement her by that simplicity which is not plainness. She does not want to appear dowdy. Careful grooming has given her a well-scrubbed look. Her nose is not shiny, her make-up is not excessive. She is attractive without being too beautiful; she makes a lasting impression without being conspicuous. The young modern exemplifies quality and inspires confidence. The average young woman wants to develop her feminine role and maintain her own identity as well (Erwin & Kinchen, p. 48).

Although she was probably conforming to an acceptable look for Home Ec, the time that Cathy spent in the Faculty had what she perceived as a negative effect on her overall appearance.

> (Speaking about a coat): So this was not a very hip thing to have in 1968 but it, I also had a leather jacket that I wore a lot cause I guess I was trying to figure things out. And I have student cards when I went, in 1967 we went to Expo 67,

> my parents took us. And so I was exposed to Montreal and my cousins in Montreal, and to my way, when I started university in 1968 I think I looked quite hip. After a year of Home Ec, considerably less hip and after two years of Home Ec, whoa… Anyway. I had to get out.

Cathy's story suggests that by conforming to the Home Ec dress code, she was becoming more and more like what Guy and Banim (2000) describe as "the woman I fear I could be" (p. 316). After two years, Cathy left Home Economics. She changed her appearance dramatically.

> Shortly thereafter I became I guess we could say a freak and wore a pair of overalls for about 8 years so, grew my hair long and had braids and hung out with freaks.

Around this time Cathy also stopped sewing. Cathy attributes giving up sewing to her dislike of polyester fabrics, which was probably a major factor. However I would also suggest that through her rejection of Home Economics (and with it home sewing and its attendant discourses) and conventional dress, she was rejecting an undesirable way of being female and beginning to forge her own non-traditional feminine identity.

Although she had no personal contact with Home Economics, Kathryn Church (1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) also equated home sewing and conventional dress with 1950s femininity. Her mother was a seamstress, who to Kathryn exemplified the virtues of "loving service to home, family and community" (Church, 2001a, p. 373). Rejecting these "virtues as traditionally expressed" (p. 373), Kathryn sought to define her own identity elsewhere.

> I sought the world of men and the power of the masculine. This would, I hoped, rescue me from living my mother's life (Church, 1998).

> Sewing created a deep but problematic connection between us. While we came to know each other through years of dressmaking, I also needed to hide from her, to distance myself. If I was to move into a public, active, and sexual womanhood (feminism rather than femininity), I needed to control my own "wardrobe" (Church, 2001b, p. 244).

Kathryn describes what she refers to as her "post-prairie phase in which I discarded all of my brown clothing" (2001a, p. 372) and another period during which she wore only black. By rejecting home sewing and defining her own wardrobe Kathryn was also

attempting to become "the woman I want to be" (Guy & Banim, 2000, p. 316); to forge an identity as a woman based on something other than traditional femininity.

The previous section outlined how in the 1950s, the positioning of home sewing within the discourse of traditional femininity gave home sewers the tools to construct strong feminine identities. Within these discourses, they were able to find positions of power. As home sewers women were essential to the economic and social well being of their families. However, as new possibilities for femininity began to emerge in the 1960s, women who positioned themselves against the old discourses of femininity had difficulty constructing positive identities for themselves as home sewers. The discourse of home sewing was too entwined with traditional femininity. As a result, home sewing was discarded in favour of other activities.

Many of these activities were also textile arts traditionally associated with women such as knitting, embroidery and weaving. However the revival of these activities was embedded in a counter-cultural philosophy reacting against mass production and materialism in Western culture (*V&A 1960s Fashion and Textiles*). This philosophy held that "making a limited number of items by hand was preferable to commercial overproduction" (*V&A Craft Textiles*). For some reason, perhaps because it was still too closely linked with traditional feminine respectability, or simply because it was time consuming and restricted one to the home (unlike knitting or embroidery that could be carried anywhere), home dressmaking did not widely become part of this counter-cultural discourse.

Unlike Kathryn Church, who only confronted her conflict with home dressmaking in the late 1990s, Cathy's disassociation with sewing was brief.

> I started sewing again in 1972 cause I met someone, a guy, who could sew, like he had sewn, he was one of those guys who could do anything, and he had done some sewing, and when he found out that I was a good sewer he couldn't believe that I didn't sew…

Perhaps by 1972 Cathy was comfortable enough with the identity that she was forging that she could again take up the activity that she loved. It is possible that her reintroduction to sewing in a different context, divorced from the connotations of 1950s femininity, enabled her to interpret the meaning of sewing in a way with which she was comfortable. Although it is beyond the scope of this analysis to determine what was

happening to home dressmaking in the 1970s, this narrative suggests a need for further research into how (and if) women understood and negotiated their identities as home dressmakers when these identities conflicted with their identities as women.

Patterns and Variations: The Exhibit

As one of the goals of this research project was to explore the creation of feminist museum exhibits, an exhibit was developed from the stories of the women who participated in this study. *Patterns and Variations: The Many Meanings of Home Sewing in Alberta, 1950-1970* was installed in the lobby display space of the Human Ecology Building between February 27 and March 1, and officially opened to the public on March 1, 2005. An opening reception was held on March 6, which was attended primarily by participants and their families, but also by other interested members of the university and museum communities. As a result of this reception, *Patterns and Variations* was invited to travel to the Alberta Legislature's Interpretive Centre in August 2005 as part of the province's centennial celebrations.

The exhibit was designed thematically rather than chronologically, and explored the following themes through women's narratives of home sewing: attitudes towards home sewing in the 1950s and 60s (For A Lucky Girl Who Sews); the impact of home sewing in the broader community (Whether you Work at Home or Away…); sewing for children (Patterns for Small Fry); learning to sew (The ABC's of Sewing); the meaning of sewing machines (Make Your Dream Dress Come True…); the meaning of uncompleted garments (A Blouse in the Making); women's creativity and design (Exclusively Yours…); and women's resourcefulness (Girls Who Sew are Girls Who Know). The section titles were taken from articles about sewing in *Chatelaine* and *Ladies' Home Journal* published between 1950 and 1969.

Like many exhibits, *Patterns and Variations* began with grandiose intentions. Exhibit reviews and museum literature written from a feminist perspective pointed to dozens of problems with traditional exhibits – I wanted to address all of them! However, with the very real constraints of time and space, this was not going to be possible.

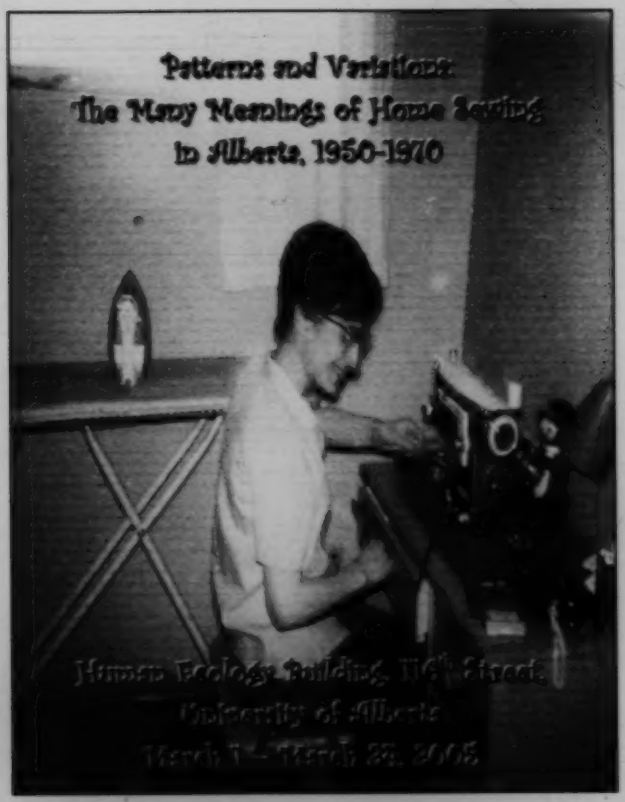


Figure 10. Invitation to *Patterns and Variations: The Many Meanings of Home Sewing in Alberta 1950- 1970.* Photograph courtesy Gordine Thomson per signed consent form.

Figure 11. Title panel, *Patterns and Variations* in the Human Ecology Building. Photograph by Marcia McLean.

Figure 12. *Patterns and Variations* in Human Ecology Building.
All photographs by Marcia McLean.

Figure 13. *For a Lucky Girl who Sews* and *Whether You Work at Home or Away*

Figure 14. *Patterns for Small Fry*

Figure 15. Long view of exhibit

Figure 16. *The ABC's of Sewing*

Figure 17. *Make Your Dream Dress Come True* and *A Blouse in the Making*

Figure 18. *Exclusively Yours* and *Girls Who Sew are Girls Who Know*

During my thesis proposal meeting, I was asked what my exhibit was going to look like. What would make it a feminist exhibit? How would visitors know that they were looking at something different than traditional museum fare? This was a very difficult question to answer. At that point I had done no interviews and met none of the participants. I had no idea whether I was even likely to find objects to display. As I went through the process of interviewing women and designing the exhibit, I kept these questions in mind.

I did, of course, begin my exhibit with an agenda. As I called women to set up interviews I was told over and over again that they did not think they had much to tell me, despite the fact that they had done a lot of sewing. McCullough (2003) argues that as women's work has traditionally been unpaid, it has not been considered of historical importance. Figart (2004) suggests, "women's skills such as caretaking and sewing have been undervalued because they were thought to be natural rather than acquired." As the wider culture has undervalued women's skills, so have women themselves. I wanted my exhibit to help them recognize the importance of their words and their work. I was concerned about how to make the topic of home sewing relevant in a broader sense. I did not want to further contribute to the marginalization of women's work through an exhibit that focused on domesticity.

I also wanted to explore the role of the museum in cultural reproduction. I wanted visitors to see how museums create meaning by the ways in which they exhibit objects, to make visitors think about the implicit meanings they come across in museum exhibits by the juxtaposition of certain objects or images. I did not want to be an invisible, seemingly detached curatorial voice; I wanted to engage visitors in dialogue.

With this wish list in mind, I wrote down my initial list of exhibit objectives:

- To encourage visitors to think about what sewing means to them/what it may have meant to other women who sewed (a guest book was provided for those who wanted to share their thoughts);
- To encourage visitors to think about the meanings of material culture objects, what assumptions they make about objects and their meanings, how context shapes those meanings and what certain objects signify to them;

- To encourage visitors to share their experiences of homemade clothing or sewing;
- To explore the process of creating an exhibit;
- To engage the visitor with the curatorial voice;
- To portray women as actors/agents in history.

Creating an exhibit is complicated. Although an exhibit has a storyline and text, it is primarily a visual, not a textual medium. One has to be able to tell one's story through objects and images with minimal text, as many visitors will not read text if they perceive that there is too much. Regardless of the disparate objects available, in the end they must come together in a cohesive, attractive whole. This is a daunting prospect to a curator who is not even certain that her research participants will have objects or images to share.

I was lucky. My research participants searched the backs of their closets and surprised themselves with the number of garments and photographs they discovered. They were incredibly generous, lending me everything I asked for and offering more. I borrowed ten pieces of clothing, dozens of photographs, two sewing machines, two Home Economics notebooks and about a dozen patterns from nine of the fifteen participants. Nine garments, eight photographs, both sewing machines, the Home Ec books and two patterns were incorporated into the final exhibit. These were supplemented by four photographs from the City of Edmonton Archives, a sewing machine belonging to Professor Anne Lambert, a magazine from the Clothing and Textile Collection and several period patterns, notions and sewing books from my personal collection that were used as props. To help bring the women in the exhibit to life for visitors, I included a fifteen minute video of interview clips that played on a continuous loop.

It was very important to me that the six women who did not lend objects for the exhibit were as present in the exhibit as the other nine. For some, this was accomplished by including clips of their interviews on the video. Unfortunately, many of the video recordings had very poor sound quality, so I was unable to use clips from everyone.[3] However, because the exhibit was arranged thematically, I was able to include at least

[3] The sound quality was poor on my recordings because I used the camera's internal microphone, which picked up a lot of noise from the camera's motor. If I were to repeat an oral history project, I would use an external microphone to ensure that the voices on the recordings were much more audible and did not have so much interference from camera noise.

one story from each participant in the text. I was committed to including everyone because each of the participants had something important to say about the experience of home sewing, whether they thought it was important or not.

The commitment to include all of the women meant that the exhibit was text heavy, so I had to abandon some of my objectives. The women's stories themselves took up so much space that I did not have room to explore museums creating meaning and reproducing culture. However, I think that this is a very important role that museum professionals need to take more responsibility for.

I can only hope that by taking sewing out of a strictly domestic sphere, *Patterns and Variations* made some people think about whom they normally see portrayed in museums and how their histories are portrayed. Because of the exhibit's location in Human Ecology, which already has a strong sewing/clothing component and a primarily female student population, I am not sure that this recognition would be as strong as it might have been in another venue, such as a community museum. It will be interesting to see how the visiting public receives my take on Alberta's history when *Patterns and Variations* is at the Legislature's Interpretive Centre in August 2005.

I also had a problem dealing with the concept of curatorial voice. There were so many voices in the exhibit with compelling stories to tell that I did not want to make my own presence intrusive. Yet I did not want to be invisible. I had initially planned to address the curatorial role in a section devoted to how museums reproduce culturally dominant ideas. When this section was cut from the exhibit I was unsure of how to proceed. I had considered the idea of beginning each text panel with a question for the visitor in an attempt to make the text more interactive. As the exhibit developed this just seemed awkward. I settled on telling visitors how I set up and framed the exhibit. The introductory panel introduced my research questions in the first person as the questions of a feminist home sewer interested in other women's experiences of home sewing:

> *At the end of the Second World War it was widely expected that Canadian women would give up the jobs that they had taken on during the war and return home to be wives and mothers. Government policies and media portrayals of men and*

women reinforced the return to traditional gender roles and strong beliefs about femininity and masculinity.

Many 1950s women embraced this role. Upheaval from the war and the new insecurity of the Cold War may have left people with a desire for safety and security, which a return to traditional gender roles and the safe haven of marriage and family seemed to offer.

Home sewing, which was considered a particularly feminine activity, became very popular.

Between 1950 and 1970, women's magazines such as Chatelaine, Ladies Home Journal and McCall's regularly included sewing tips and featured the latest sewing patterns and equipment.

In 1958, Time magazine estimated that 20% of all women's clothing was made at home and reported that the average age of sewers had dropped to 27 from 45 in 1928. A "common but fashionable wedding present for suburban brides" was a sewing machine.

Not all women were happy with this turn of events. In 1963, Betty Friedan, author of The Feminine Mystique, lamented the fact that home sewing had become a million dollar industry.

Friedan, like many 1960s feminists, saw sewing as belonging to a limited ideology of femininity that restricted women's sphere of action and kept them subordinate to men.

As a feminist and a home sewer of a later generation, I was curious about these positions.

What did the women who sewed at home think? What stories could they tell about their sewing? What did home sewing mean to them?

I asked fifteen women who sewed during the 1950s and 60s to share their stories with me. This exhibit explores their stories.

The closing panel returned to my questions and provided a summary. Where it was appropriate I was also present in the text through small statements such as "Memories of sewing classes were both positive and negative for the women I interviewed" and "Every woman I spoke to remembered her first machine." I think that this approach succeeded. At the very least it made visitors aware that I had a goal in creating the exhibit and a reason for presenting the stories that I chose. The exhibit was written in the language of subjective experience and was not presented as a blind rendering of "the facts" (see Appendix B for the full text of the exhibit).

As the exhibit developed, I decided that one way to demonstrate the historical significance of home sewing (beyond its making up a significant portion of women's work) was to point out that clothes made at home were worn by men, women and children far beyond the home. In addition to putting this in text and augmenting it with women's stories, I chose several images of non-domestic spaces (such as school, work, retail and recreational spaces) to try and dispel the domesticity. Because I was trying to "un-domesticate" home sewing, my initial floor plan was rather sparse. Given that it would be impossible to completely divorce the idea of "home sewing" from "in the home," I did not want any unnecessary furniture reinforcing the connection.

Unfortunately, when the exhibit was installed some areas looked very empty and incomplete. The spaces were filled in with a cabinet sewing machine, a dressmaker's dummy, sewing tools, books and an unfolded pattern meant to look like a work in progress. I think that this last-minute fix combined with the fact that there was no men's clothing[4] and no photographs of men in homemade clothing may have "re-domesticated" and "re-feminized" the topic more than I had hoped. However, since I certainly do not want to "masculinize" the work of these women or suggest that women's work is only important when it enters the masculine domain, I do not think that designing a

[4] Few of the participants in this study sewed for men, usually because they felt it was too difficult or too time consuming. Most expressed a preference for sewing skirts or dresses. Those who had sewn for men no longer had any of the men's clothing they had made, and could not locate photographs of it. Therefore there were no pieces of male clothing or photographs of men available for the exhibit.

recognizably female space is such a bad thing. After all, this exhibit was intended to be a celebration of women's work, much of which has unquestionably occurred in the home. The hurdle is in figuring out how to make "feminine" equate with "relevant".

In the closing panel I suggested, "None of these women expressed feeling constrained or restricted by their sewing." This consensus worries me. Not all of the women that I interviewed for this project had an easy relationship with sewing, as can be seen in the text of my thesis. Although Cathy Roy loved sewing, she was not always comfortable with the activity. While semantically I am not sure that she felt constrained or restricted by it, she obviously had an uneasy relationship with Home Economics and sewing by the late 1960s, and she stopped sewing altogether around 1970 (though she did return to sewing later in the decade). While I have strong reasons for excluding this aspect of Cathy's story, I also feel that I did women's history a disservice by glossing over her conflict and thus suggesting that women's experiences were universally positive.

My decision to exclude Cathy's story of her break with home dressmaking was partially due to the fact that it contained a heavy criticism of conservatism with Home Economics at the U of A in the late 1960s. While I do not doubt Cathy's individual experience, as a feminist curator I believe that it is my responsibility to "myth-bust" and to demonstrate the complexity of women's experiences rather than to perpetuate common stereotypes. In a post-second wave[5] feminist world, Home Economics has often been painted as "a conspiracy to keep women in the kitchen" (Keating, 2001). However, while there were conservative voices within Home Economics in the 1960s, there were also feminist voices pushing for change (conversation with Anne Lambert, June 21, 2005; Keating, 2001). Rightly or wrongly, I felt that including Cathy's experiences of Home Economics without also providing broader context into the debates that were occurring within the field in the 1960s would only serve to perpetuate broad stereotypes about Home Economics and therefore about women's experiences and history. Because Home

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[5] Second wave refers to the increase in feminist activity that occurred in North America, Britain, and Europe in the 1960s and 70s. "The slogan 'the personal is political' sums up the way in which second wave feminism did not just strive to extend the range of social opportunities open to women, but also, through intervention within the spheres of reproduction, sexuality and cultural representation, to change their domestic and private lives" (http://spider.georgetowncollege.edu/ws/1st,_2nd,_3rd_wave.htm).

Economics was not a major focus of the exhibit, and because I had very limited space, I would not have been able to provide this context for the viewers.

This conflict demonstrates one of the essential difficulties of curating feminist exhibits in a not-yet-feminist[6] world. There are so many assumptions made about women and their histories that it becomes difficult to know which ones to address and which ones to leave for another day. By choosing not to perpetuate a negative stereotype of Home Economics, I may have fuelled the assumption that women shared a common experience. Did I make the right decision? Which myths are more important to break? Though I have come to terms with my decision in this instance and am now happy with the finished exhibit, as a general rule I do not know and suspect that it will take many years and many exhibits before I am able to answer this question satisfactorily.

My end list of exhibit objectives looked like this:

- To enable women to speak about activities and objects significant to them in a venue where they and their activities have not traditionally been viewed as noteworthy;
- To portray women as actors/agents in history;
- To place women's sewing in the context of their communities, rather than exclusively in the home;
- To encourage visitors to think about what home sewing means to them or relatives who sewed and to share their own stories;
- To encourage visitors to think about the meanings and significance of everyday, taken-for-granted activities and objects.

I feel relatively confident that I was able to meet these objectives. Overall, the feedback I have received from viewers, both through a visitor guest book and through personal contact, has been incredibly positive. I am looking forward to the feedback that the exhibit receives while it is at the Legislature, as that will be a much more diverse audience, with differing expectations about what a centennial exhibit should be than my prior audience had about what a thesis exhibit should be.

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[6] Not-yet-feminist, because the goals of feminism (as outlined in the definitions (see especially hooks, 1981)) have not yet been met.

I incorporated several of the suggestions laid out in the literature (e.g. Hasted, 1994; Kavanagh, 1994; Knibb, 1994; Livingstone, 2003; Mayo, 2003; Porter, 2004) for developing feminist exhibits. I made women's perspectives the central frame of reference, actively collected objects related to women's histories, conducted primary research and oral histories, consulted with the participants about how they were to be represented, emphasized female defined areas of experience, and developed a thematic approach to the exhibit rather than a linear or chronological one.

In the end, I am not sure that it looked very different from a more traditionally conceived exhibit. I think it is not the aesthetics of museum professionals that have to change, but our approach to thinking about artifacts and subject matter when it comes to creating exhibits. Community museums often have difficulty capturing the histories of objects when they are donated, especially if they are unsolicited donations (which the majority of community museum acquisitions are). Although most museums ask donors for a brief history of the object in order to determine whether it fits with the museum's mandate for collecting (i.e. that it fits into the correct historical or geographical framework), in many cases curators or registrars do not make the time to sit down and talk with the donor to learn more about the object's context of use. While this can in part be attributed to lack of resources, it also has to do with the priority that has been placed on learning context of the history of the object.

While resources for museum workers certainly advocate researching objects, I do not think that they articulate all of the questions that need to be asked. An excerpt from a draft site visit report prepared by the Alberta Museums Association suggests:

> Information can be sought from people connected with the object; for example, the donor, private collectors, and people who made or used the object or ones similar to it. They can often convey information about the artifact's context; for example, its techniques of manufacture, the tools and equipment used to make it, and the history of the business where it was made (Alberta Museums Association, 2005).

This is all very useful information to collect from "people connected with the object," however I do not think it goes far enough. More probing questions about people's relationships with objects (e.g. what did you like or dislike about this object, how did you feel when using this object?) need to be asked if we want to present a full, non-

stereotypical picture of the meanings that objects held for people in the past. For example, my research suggests that women felt strongly about their sewing machines. When asked, they spoke of them lovingly, almost as though the machines had their own personalities.

> Anna: So I fell for this Pfaff machine and that's the best machine in the world. I still wish I had it. It was, you could sew anything with it, apart from lumber (laughing). It would take leather, it just made everything and anything that I wanted with it. And it was a very very good machine.
>
> Norma: As I said mother gave us a sewing machine when we were married, that was our wedding gift. It was a Singer Featherweight a wonderful machine, wonderful machine. I used it for many, many years... If it had a fault it was because you were trying to do too much with them in the way of bulk, and it would sew forward and backward but no fancy stitches or anything so I didn't do that. But you could do anything with it.... Mind you it worked, this little machine the Featherweight, it never refused anything you asked it to do.
>
> Lois: Then a few years later I got a brand new Singer and I had that for a long time but it would only sew forwards and you couldn't make it go backwards. Then with all the new materials I had to change, but that was such a good machine. It was just like driving a Cadillac.

Without asking women questions about the significance of objects *to them*, important pieces of object provenance are never recorded.

There are very few topics on which one could not incorporate relevant female perspectives. Researching this exhibit made me consider that I have never seen a sewing machine in an exhibit about youth culture (though many "cool" young women sewed and continue to sew). As museum professionals, we must reconsider how we use objects. They can tell so many stories that depart from the obvious.

As a final note, it is known that some curators and institutions shy away from "political" exhibits because of the potential for controversy. Although every circumstance is different, claiming a curatorial voice could be one way for curators and their institutions to navigate political topics. In the beginning, I was rather nervous that some of the women in my exhibit would object to the "feminist" stance that I was taking. However, I made a point of positioning *myself* as feminist in the exhibit, not them. No one commented on it at all.

Conclusion

Summary

This study set out to answer the following questions:

- What did the act of home dressmaking mean to women?
- What meanings did they read into the clothing they produced?
- What did Alberta women reveal about themselves through the clothing that they sewed at home?

All of the women who participated in this study loved to sew. Their stories clearly show that sewing was a meaningful activity that went beyond simple fashion, fit or economy. For many of the women that I spoke to, sewing was a survival skill. However, being able to make attractive clothing out of remnants, flour sacks or recycled materials gave them a sense of pride in their abilities. Home dressmaking gave many women the freedom to develop design skills and express their creativity in a socially sanctioned manner. The women I spoke to were proud of their skills and of the clothes that they made. They enjoyed challenging themselves and creating well-made, attractive garments.

Tying all of these meanings together were the discourses of home sewing and femininity through which women constructed their feminine identities. Positioned within the discourse of traditional femininity, home sewing exemplified three essential feminine virtues: attention to appearance, thrift and practical creativity.

Women who participated in this study characterized their appearances as plain, simple and conservative, a characterization reflecting Alberta's cultural heritage and values. More than being fashionable, these women were interested in looking respectable and being comfortable. Within the context of home dressmaking this meant making clothes that were stylish but not high fashion, that fit well and that looked attractive. However, many women felt that the visual standards of quality imposed by teachers of home dressmaking were too high, which would become problematic as standards of dress relaxed and women's priorities changed in the 1960s.

Women who sewed in the 1950s cited economics as a major reason for sewing clothing for themselves and their families. Several stated that they had no option but to sew. However, while it is evident that home dressmaking helped to stretch family

clothing budgets, women's narratives suggest that there were women in Alberta communities who chose not to sew, relying instead on social and family networks for trading resources and sharing work to clothe their families respectably. Women who enjoyed home dressmaking would continue to sew while earning wages or being otherwise employed full time, even if this meant sacrificing sleep to continue an enjoyable activity. Using the discourse of sewing as feminine thrift enabled women to position their work as central to the economic well being of their families, rather than simply as an enjoyable hobby, which would make it much less acceptable as a feminine activity.

Younger women who sewed only in the 1960s did not cite economics as strongly as a motivation for home dressmaking. Although most mentioned that sewing at home was inexpensive, a stronger motivation for these women was the opportunity that home dressmaking afforded them to create unique garments that were unavailable to them otherwise because of their location (in small towns or the "cultural backwater" of Edmonton) or the fact that they existed only in the imagination. To these women, home dressmaking represented the potential to create anything that they wanted.

While many participants cited creativity as a reason for enjoying home dressmaking, their definition of creativity varied from a traditional definition rooted in originality or uniqueness. Instead, women appreciated the practical challenges to their creative abilities that home dressmaking posed in tasks such as remaking old clothing, creating garments from remnants or making mistakes appear to be intentional. Although most women sewed from patterns, several adapted, altered or "mixed and matched" patterns to create clothing that they wanted but could not find patterns for. In this sense, many women incorporated a great deal of design into their home dressmaking, as they used the tools at hand to create new patterns for garments that existed only in their imaginations.

A sense of accomplishment was another strong reason for enjoying home dressmaking. Sewing enabled women to experience the completion of a task in a way that other housework, which is perpetual, could not. Through home dressmaking, women moved out of the sphere of reproductive labour (immanence) into the sphere of productive labour (transcendence), which had traditionally been reserved for men. Home

dressmaking's status as a particularly feminine activity gave women the opportunity to participate in creative, challenging, satisfying work with a tangible, durable outcome without being deemed unfeminine.

Discourses of home sewing that were closely related to traditional feminine ideals enabled women to construct positive identities in the 1950s; however by the late 1960s this close relationship was becoming problematic for home dressmakers seeking new models of femininity. There were no obvious alternative discourses of home sewing that women could use to position the activity positively. This led some women to reject home sewing altogether, or at least to stop sewing until they were able to position the activity within what they saw as a more positive discourse.

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature suggesting that the meanings that women apply to the act of sewing and its products are shaped by their personal experiences and their social, cultural, institutional and economic contexts. Though several participants reported being economically disadvantaged in the 1950s, none viewed their homemade clothing as an "unwelcome badge of poverty" (Burman 1999b, p. 37). However these women enjoyed sewing, their skill levels were very high and many noted that everyone else in the community was "in the same boat."

Like the home sewers studied by Burman (1994), Moseley (2001) and Szeless (2002) the participants in this study experienced home dressmaking as an opportunity to express themselves creatively or to acquire attractive clothing that would otherwise have been unaffordable. They found their sewing to be a source of pride and empowerment.

This study also found limited evidence to suggest that women who viewed home dressmaking as representative of, "a prescriptive and limited ideology of femininity" (Hackney, 1999, p.74) would not sew, even if sewing was an activity that they enjoyed very much.

The findings of this study concur with findings of other studies that suggested that women's self-images and personal identities are closely tied to dress, and that dress and identity are strongly connected to culture. Like the women in Church's (1998, 2003) exhibit, these Alberta women also characterized their individual looks plain and simple, reflecting "a cultural repertoire that is collectively shared by women in small town and

rural Alberta" (Church, 2003 p.19/20). Urban Alberta women who participated in this study also shared in this cultural repertoire.

In an endeavor to theorize the historical significance of home dressmaking, Buckley (1999) states that women's accounts of home dressmaking, "can provide invaluable insights into aspects of...social, cultural and creative lives, and in particular, changing feminine identities" (p. 67). This study has added to our understanding of how women actively construct their feminine identities by accepting or rejecting discourses of femininity and home dressmaking and by positioning themselves positively within available discourses. It has also provided some insight into how constructions of feminine identity change as societal discourses around the roles of women change, and how this transition is not always a smooth one. Social positioning theory provided a framework for analyzing women's conversation. While social positioning theory acknowledges the constraints of a local moral order on all actors, it does not limit women to the position of "victims" of oppressive social structures and practices. Looking at how women positioned themselves and their experiences in conversation provided insight into women's agency and how they locate positions of power, even in historical periods that are considered to be repressive.

A secondary purpose of this project was to explore the process of developing a feminist museum exhibit. In 1988, Porter wrote:

> In the social and local history museums which form the majority of all museums [women] are seated in the parlour, engaged in needlework, lacemaking, or other ladylike pursuits. Occasionally they can be found doing the laundry, or cooking in the kitchen.... Women are absent and barely visible in the larger industrial museums. Except as domestic servants, shop assistants, and occasionally munitions workers, the museum visitor might be forgiven for thinking that women in the past did not work outside the home at all, and spent most of their time sitting at home sewing (p. 107).

Seventeen years later as an inveterate museum visitor and an insider to the museum profession, I do not see that a lot has changed, especially in small community museums, which constitute the majority of museums in Canada. For example, between 1999 and 2003 I worked in a pioneer village museum where every house contained sewing, crafting or cooking paraphernalia to suggest the presence and work of women. The only business in the village that interpreted women's work outside the home was a dressmaker's shop.

While we attempted to depict women's broader roles through programming, the museum was chronically short of resources for hiring interpretive staff so visitors often saw these buildings without the benefit of interpreters. What did the placement of these "women's artifacts" suggest about women's roles and tasks in the community?

The village was set up as a "walk through time" with buildings depicting life in part of southwestern Ontario between 1820 and 1920. Aside from technological advancements, the objects suggesting the presence of women did not change from house to house over this walk across a century. Did women's lives, responsibilities and experiences change at all over the course of the century? I would argue that the exhibits suggest that they did not. When one considers that museum depictions of women's lives in the twentieth century are also often linked to domestic artifacts, one has to wonder what messages curators are sending viewers, intentional or not, about women's history.

Women have made incredible advances in society and now take for granted rights that some women of less than a century ago were prepared to do violence and risk their health for, yet museum exhibits still persist in depicting women as primarily domestic. Although I have seen typewriters spanning at least five decades in museums, I have never seen one set up in an office vignette depicting the presence of women in the workplace. I have often seen female interpreters at village museums working in the fields or in period businesses such as newspaper offices dressed in male garb and playing male personas because there was not enough male staff to take on these roles (community museums now also, ironically, being primarily "women's work"). In rare specially themed publications such as Cultural Resource Management's *Placing Women in the Past* (1997) and Dubrow & Goodman's *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation* (2003) I have heard of museums that, when faced with this problem, did research to find out if even one woman in the community did this work around which to develop a gender appropriate character. However in my own (non-scientific) excursions both as a visitor and a museum professional, I have not seen this put into practice.

Patterns and Variations provided one example of feminist museum practice. This discussion has added one more voice to the ongoing discussion of the role of museums in the twenty-first century.

Recommendations for Future Research

A few obvious recommendations for future study arise. All of the participants identified themselves as lovers of home sewing; however, there were undoubtedly women who sewed in the 1950s and 60s who did not enjoy it. In order to better understand the construction of feminine identities and the links between discourses of femininity and home sewing in the 1950s and 60s, these women should be interviewed. It would also be informative to interview women who did not sew during this period, to understand how they defined their identities within or against the discourses of femininity at play in the 50s and 60s.

The women who participated in this study represent a fairly homogeneous segment of the population. None was a visible minority and all spoke English as a first language. All but one were born in Canada. A study that examined the experiences of home sewers of different cultural or linguistic backgrounds would undoubtedly broaden understandings of the meanings of home dressmaking and the construction of feminine identities cross culturally.

This study found that the construction of many women's identities was tied to the cultural and political history of Alberta. How did women define themselves in other parts of Canada? How were feminine identities interpreted in parts of Canada with very different cultural histories (such as Quebec) or political histories (such as Ontario or provinces on the coasts)? A project examining these questions could lead to a greater understanding of identity construction across the country and of the regional identities that continue to be politically relevant today.

The majority of women who participated in this study were past their teenage years when youth culture really began to boom. Although this study touched on it, an expanded study of young sewers in the 1960s could shed light on what it meant to be young, female and a home sewer in the 1960s. While searching for research participants, I learned of a Chinese Canadian woman who was a teenager in Toronto in the 1960s. Every Saturday she and her sister would head to the fashion district, purchase fabric and spend the weekend making new dresses. It was their "fun." What did this activity mean to them? Tying the last three suggestions for future research together, one could ask: Did producing clothing in a large, multicultural urban centre help to shape their identities as

young Chinese Canadian women? Questions like this would broaden our understanding of femininities and the cross-cultural meanings of home dressmaking in Canada.

One woman's reasons for stopping sewing in the late 1960s were explored in this thesis. Several other participants noted that they stopped sewing or sewing clothing in the 1970s. Exploring their reasons for doing this was outside of the scope of this study. Was this related to changing expectations of women or new discourses of femininity? Exploring women's reasons for ceasing sewing would add to our understanding of how women's perceptions of appropriate femininity and feminine activities changed as societal values and expectations changed in the 1970s and 80s.

This study also found that women tend to define their creativity in a way that is not linked to traditional concepts such as "originality" or "uniqueness." Looking at creativity through women's eyes could provide new insights into women's creative lives and the ways in which women have contributed to culture and community in Canadian history.

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Appendix A: The Participants

Joyce Cundict[7] learned to sew in school in England when she was five years old. She emigrated to Hattonford, Alberta with her family in 1920. She was married in 1937. Living on a quarter section near Hattonford in the 1950s, Joyce sewed almost all of her family's clothing and made other necessary household textiles. In the 1960s Joyce moved to Edmonton where she worked at a nursing home and continued to sew for her family and friends.

Anna Duncan's first sewing "episode" took place when she was 7 years old and decided to make herself a dress. She learned to make patterns based on existing garments from her mother, but switched to using commercial patterns when she discovered that they were easier than making her own. Anna enjoyed sewing for her family, friends and neighbours. In the 1950s and 60s Anna and her husband and three sons lived in the Calder area of Edmonton.

Helen Duquette learned to sew from her mother. In 1953, she and her husband moved from Saskatchewan to a farm outside of Millet, Alberta. She sewed many of the textiles needed by the family as well as making clothing for her eight children.

When Lois Gregory was six or seven years old, she cut up one of her father's linen handkerchiefs to make a dress for her Kewpie doll. Unfortunately it did not fit. After that, her mother taught her how to sew and she began to make her own clothes. In the 1950s and 60s Lois and her husband farmed outside of Vegreville. One of Lois' children is Dianne Smiley, another participant in this study.

Jean Jordan's first sewing project was a blouse that she made with her sister one weekend when their parents were away. Jean moved to Kinuso, Alberta with her husband shortly after their marriage in 1947. In addition to raising five children, Jean taught elementary school. Around 1966 she began to teach Home Economics to junior

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[7] These are the participants' real names. See discussion of human research ethics on page 38 and ethics documents in Appendix C.

high school students. She initiated a program called "Bachelor Practice" to teach male students how to cook and sew. Jean tried to make herself a new outfit every six weeks to keep her sewing students inspired.

Prior to beginning to sew for her children in the early 1950s, Lois Lindholm had made only one pair of pyjamas. Her skills improved quickly through practice and lessons from the District Home Economist. Lois, her husband and their eight children lived on a farm near New Norway in the 1950s and 60s.

Marliss Meyer grew up in Barrhead, Alberta. She initially learned to sew from her mother and looked forward to taking Home Economics in grade eight. She enjoyed designing her own clothes and bringing her ideas to life through her sewing machine. Marliss moved to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta in the late 1960s.

Norma Robertson remembers sewing punch cards when she was four years old, and knitting half of a pair of socks at the age of seven. When she attended University High School in Edmonton, she was very unhappy that there was no sewing component to the curriculum. In the early 1950s, Norma and her husband began building the home on an acreage just outside of Edmonton where they raised their six children.

Susan Robertson learned to sew in a Home Economics class in grade six. In the 1960s she moved to High Level, Alberta where her father was an Anglican priest. She made many clothes for herself and enjoyed sewing dresses for her daughters.

Cathy Roy learned to sew from her mother and looked forward to Home Economics classes so she would be able to sew in school. She grew up in Edmonton on the same street that her family had lived on for three generations. Cathy enjoyed ironing and working with wool, and in 1977 she attended NAIT to become a custom tailor.

Nellie Roy learned to sew as a teenager, but took a course from the Singer Sewing Company when she moved to Edmonton in the early 1950s. She is the mother of three

children, one of whom is Cathy Roy, who also participated in this study. Nellie sewed clothing for herself, her mother and her two daughters, including the outfits that they wore to see the Queen when she visited in Edmonton in 1959.

Ruby Sills remembers buying fabric to make a dress with the money she won racing at a picnic when she was about 12 years old. Ruby moved to Edmonton from Saskatchewan in the 1940s. She sewed clothing for herself, her husband and her four children, including both of her daughters' wedding dresses.

Dianne Smiley grew up on a farm outside of Vegreville. She began sewing as a junior high school student in the early 1960s. She enjoyed sewing so much that she joined the 4-H sewing club where she could make more complex clothes than were on the Home Economics curriculum.

Gordine Thomson made doll clothes with her mother's hand-cranked sewing machine as a child in Saskatchewan. The family moved to Edmonton in the mid-1950s. Gordine enjoyed sewing and made many of her own clothes. She was married in 1965 in a dress that she made herself. Gordine and her husband resided in Hinton where Gordine taught elementary school.

Jeanne Westlund learned to sew by keeping "her nose in" her mother's sewing. One of the first projects she remembers making was a skirt from an old pair of her father's pants. She continued to make over clothing for her children in Drayton Valley in the 1960s. Jeanne continues to sew for her family, friends and neighbours.

Appendix B: Patterns and Variations: The Many Meanings of Home Sewing in Alberta, 1950-1970 (Full Text)

For A Lucky Girl Who Sews

At the end of the Second World War it was widely expected that Canadian women would give up the jobs that they had taken on during the war and return home to be wives and mothers. Government policies and media portrayals of men and women reinforced the return to traditional gender roles and strong beliefs about femininity and masculinity.

Many 1950s women embraced this role. Upheaval from the war and the new insecurity of the Cold War may have left people with a desire for safety and security, which a return to traditional gender roles and the safe haven of marriage and family seemed to offer.

Home sewing, which was considered a particularly feminine activity, became very popular.

Between 1950 and 1970, women's magazines such as *Chatelaine, Ladies Home Journal* and *McCall's* regularly included sewing tips and featured the latest sewing patterns and equipment.

In 1958, *Time* magazine estimated that 20% of all women's clothing was made at home and reported that the average age of sewers had dropped to 27 from 45 in 1928. A "common but fashionable wedding present for suburban brides" was a sewing machine.

Not all women were happy with this turn of events. In 1963, Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, lamented the fact that home sewing had become a million dollar industry.

Friedan, like many 1960s feminists, saw sewing as belonging to a limited ideology of femininity that restricted women's sphere of action and kept them subordinate to men.

As a feminist and a home sewer of a later generation, I was curious about these positions.

What did the women who sewed at home think? What stories could they tell about their sewing? What did home sewing mean to them?

I asked fifteen women who sewed during the 1950s and 60s to share their stories with me. This exhibit explores their stories.

Whether you Work at Home or Away...

Although sewing was an activity done largely at home, without it many families could not have performed their tasks in the outside world. Husbands, children, parents and siblings wore homemade clothing to work and to school.
The women in this exhibit went to school, held office jobs, worked in stores, traveled across the country and abroad, taught school, raised families, farmed, operated sawmills, got married, volunteered and built communities. Much of this was done while they wore clothes that were made at home.

Crepe dress made by Ruby Sills, 1948

Ruby Sills made this dress to wear to her husband's graduation from university in 1948. She chose white because she had been married in a suit and decided that she finally deserved to have a white dress.

Wool dress made by Nellie Roy

Nellie Roy wore this dress to the Legislative Assembly where she worked as a stenographer in the late 1960s.

Many women spoke of balancing sewing with their other responsibilities. Joyce Cundict raised five children and looked after livestock on the family farm. Between 1955 and 1960 she worked at the Co-op store in Hattonford.

"We sewed everything there was that we could... It was usually in the evening because you were usually busy doing things outside in the daytime. Rainy days you sewed. This friend of mine said, gee it's been a good summer for sewing, it's rained nearly all the time."

Jeanne Westlund made all of her clothes when she returned to work in 1968 after almost ten years at home with her children.

"When I first started to work I didn't have any clothes because I had been at home then for just about ten years and had nothing really to wear. I'd sit up 'til 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning sewing myself a dress so I could wear it the next day. But it worked."

Lois Gregory sewed in the mornings before her children woke up.

"I can remember getting up at 6. My husband would get up early in the morning to do the chores, so I would get up at the same time and I'd sew for maybe half an hour

before the youngsters got up. Well there was always peace and quiet in the house at that time."

Patterns for Small Fry

Child's cotton dress, circa 1950 - 1954

Many women's associations with homemade clothing began in childhood wearing clothes made for them by their mothers or female relatives. Gordine Thomson's aunt made this dress for her in the early 1950s when Gordine was about 10 years old. She made a matching dress for Gordine's sister.

The photograph behind shows Gordine and her sister wearing matching plaid skirts made for them by their mother. Of these and the blue dresses Gordine said,

"We felt pretty proud cause we didn't often get something new."

Wool suit made by Ruby Sills, 1967

Ruby Sills sewed for her two sons and two daughters.

"My husband was a teacher and not making much salary so I had to sew. I made everything. There was a lady who lived behind us whose husband was quite a big fellow and when his pants got shiny he wouldn't wear them anymore. So she gave them to me and I ripped them apart, turned them inside out and washed them and made dress pants for the boys, zippers and all.

And the girls, dresses, skirts and blouses, even ski jackets I made for them. It was necessary to make everything."

Ruby made this suit for her daughter when she went to university in 1967. Ruby's sewing skills enabled her daughter to dress just as well as her more affluent friends.

Anna Duncan's sons in tweed suits, late 1940s

Anna Duncan made clothing for her three sons until they reached their teens.

"Little boys' clothes were hard to get. Nice clothes for boys were very hard to get during the war and in the post war period. For ten years you really couldn't get anything other than infant clothes, like rompers, and after that you got jeans, or corduroy things, but nothing really dressy unless you went into a very high market which most people couldn't afford."

Jean Jordan made shirts for her grown up sons.

"When they got into university, they were very long in the arms and slight in the body, and we could not buy shirts to fit. If they wanted long sleeves, if they fit in the shoulders they were way up on their arms.

So I made shirts and put in a label "Made especially for you by Jean." My one son said, "I told everybody that was my tailor."

Norma Robertson's son in homemade coat and overalls, 1954

Sewing may have been only one part of a strategy for clothing growing children.

"I was very fortunate, my mother [also] sewed and knit for the children. I have a cousin in Ontario and over the years clothing boxes would get shipped back and forth. So as each of us would get clothes given to us or made we'd add them to the box and ship them back. And next time we would get a bunch of goodies plus things we had sent down earlier, so this made an enormous difference to clothing.

If we hadn't had that give and take, I really don't know how we would have dressed the children as well as we did."

Ladies Home Journal, October 1962

Although many women found it necessary to sew for their children, many also took pleasure in it.

Susan Robertson recalled:

"When my daughter was two I made us both matching velveteen dresses. They were Christmas dresses, green velveteen with little collars. We had them matching and I remember I really liked that."

The ABC's of Sewing

Memories of sewing classes were both positive and negative for the women I interviewed. Marliss Meyer looked forward to junior high so that she could begin sewing.

"Sewing was always a part of my family life and I was eager to start Home Economics because everyone knew when you were in grade 8 you got to make a skirt and a top and an apron. I think every girl in Alberta probably went through that."

Jeanne Westlund did not learn anything new in her high school sewing class.

"In fact I showed the teacher how to thread the machine."

Sewing lessons were also available outside of schools through the District Home Economists, businesses like the Singer Sewing Machine Company, and youth clubs like 4-H.

Wool dress made by Cathy Roy

Cathy Roy made this dress as a Home Economics project in high school. Cathy learned to sew from family members.

"I learned to sew when I was 9 years old and I distinctly remember my mother saying, "You are 9 years old and old enough to make your own clothes." Because she was an accomplished needlewoman as was her mother, it was expected that I would be a needlewoman.

My grandma lived with us for a time when she was quite old. I remember her examining a project that I made, a heather wool, round necked, short sleeved, dress. She was examining to make sure that I'd lined up the side seam of the skirt and the bodice just exactly. She pronounced that I had passed, so there was that positive influence."

Singer Sewing Machine Co. Ltd., 1949

Nellie Roy took a course from the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Edmonton. She felt that the course improved her skills considerably.

"The one thing that stays in my mind is she said be sure you always cut your thread off at an angle and I thought, you know how big a piece of thread is, and you should worry about an angle? But, it makes it go through the eye of the needle easier, even that little tiny bit of angle."

Lois Lindholm wearing suit she made at a sewing class, 1960s

Lois Lindholm and Lois Gregory both took sewing lessons from their local District Home Economists.

"I took a few sewing classes from the District Home Economist in Vegreville, who was my cousin, and that seemed to make sewing that much easier.

I can remember making a red wool dress, lined, and I was trying to put the sleeves in and they were bunching up. She said, "You have to pin it all the way around, almost one pin next to the next one," and I thought, "Oh boy." And it turned out beautiful. I always liked that red dress."

- Lois Gregory

Lois Lindholm began sewing in the early 1950s after she was married. Prior to making clothes for her children she had sewn only one pair of pyjamas.

"I shudder at some of the first things the kids had to wear but they didn't know any different so they wore them. I improved.

Quite a ways along in our married life I went to the Home Ec in Edberg and took [sewing] from that lady. She was very good and very fussy and that helped.

My sister in law and I took a course and we had to buy new sewing machines so we could zigzag and stuff. We made nighties and t-shirts and panties and we were going to save lots of money, but you know what? Our husbands took us all over Alberta for materials so we didn't save any money. But it was fun. Those were really good times."

Make Your Dream Dress Come True...

Women felt very strongly about their sewing machines. Every woman I spoke to remembered her first machine. Many still have their first machines, though they no longer use them.

"Mom's had a treadle on it. In fact she passed away about two years ago and she was still using the same machine. I've got it now and I treasure it."

- Jeanne Westlund

Sewing machines represented to many women their ability to make anything they imagined into reality.

Marliss Meyer's sewing machine, purchased second hand circa 1968

"When I was little I used to draw dresses on cut out dolls and you would trace over them and then use your imagination and create all kinds of things. Well with sewing you could actually make them.

[Buying the machine] was really exciting. Probably why I hadn't sewn in my first and second years [of university] was because I had to wait until I went home in the

summer. So I would imagine great things and think I could make them if I just had the sewing machine.

So when I finally bought it and had a place to use it, it was going back to being able to draw those designs. I spent lots of time drawing out designs imagining how I would make something and then had the opportunity to make it with that sewing machine."

Dianne Smiley's sewing machine, 1969

> ***" When I first started sewing on my own after I was married, I had a small portable that my grandmother had purchased for a wedding gift for me, and that little machine I carried all over the place. I still have it."***
>
> - Dianne Smiley

"Mother gave us a sewing machine when we were married, that was our wedding gift. It was a Singer Featherweight, a wonderful little machine. I used it for many, many years.... They're exceptional machines and so portable.... It never refused anything we asked it to do."

- Norma Robertson

Midi length wool coat made by Cathy Roy, 1969

Pieces of clothing could also represent the ability to create anything one wanted.

"With a high enough skill level you could make anything you wanted, and eventually because I made coats, I realized I could make anything I wanted.

It's actually easier to make a coat than it is to make a jacket because the fabric is thicker and more malleable. You can put everything into it that you need. You can put a heavier lining; you can put underlining for warmth if you want. You can put a chamois in the back, and a real full one, not some stupid little piece that they say chamois lined but its such a small piece you couldn't even wash a window with it.

I guess that's what I like [about sewing]; that I could have exactly what I like."

A Blouse in the Making

Unfinished garments can also tell stories. They could be disappointments that did not meet their maker's expectations.

Some stories are more poignant. Joyce Cundict showed me a half-finished blouse that her failing eyesight would not allow her to complete.

Cathy Roy sees her unfinished garments as steps on her path to becoming a professional tailor.

"I had lots of unfinished projects that my mother always tore her hair out over, but when I finally went to NAIT in 1977 and became a tailor, she admitted that all of these unfinished projects had amounted to something, cause they were all experimental."

This unfinished smock has been in Anna Duncan's closet since 1956.

Exclusively Yours...

Women often had clear ideas about what they wanted to make. If they could not find an existing pattern, many would improvise with those that were available. Marliss Meyer mixed and matched her patterns to create the designs that she imagined.

"I would adapt patterns, you know, share a sleeve from one pattern to another or a collar from one pattern to another. I made my younger sister's wedding dress, and we adapted that from a shirt pattern. It was a very sophisticated shirt and we just extended it to a long coatdress and it was beautiful. We trimmed it with a white braid it was very smart.

I didn't ever draft patterns; we didn't learn that. All of my sewing was done from patterns and adapting them with pieces here and there. And it worked."

Klondike Days costume made by Anna Duncan, 1962.

Anna Duncan also adapted patterns to suit her taste.

"I adjusted them a lot, and changed them around just, you know... Sometimes I'd have an idea of what I wanted and I couldn't find a pattern and I changed it around a bit."

When Edmonton's fair adopted the Klondike Days theme in 1962, there were no patterns for Klondike Days costumes. So Anna used an existing dress pattern and her imagination to create this one.

Girls Who Sew are Girls Who Know

Many women were extremely resourceful and creative when it came to making over old clothing. Helen Duquette remembered:

"If there were people that were moving away, very often they would give [old] things to somebody who had children, and then you could make over things and that was very popular. And that way nobody got repeats because there wasn't that much to cut. We had to make over lots of things because you couldn't go to the store and just buy new material all the time, it just wasn't there."

Jean Jordan remodelled clothing to challenge herself.

"I made a coat of mine over for our daughter. It was a blue coat and I turned the material and I was very proud of it. That wasn't a case of not being able to afford to buy new. I had a very, very good friend who did a lot of sewing and I think there was a little bit of competition between the two of us.... She kept me going."

Bridesmaid's dress made by Gordine Thomson, 1963

Women remodelled their own clothing to make it last longer. Gordine Thomson wore this dress in a wedding party and then shortened it to wear at a later date.

Lois Lindholm described her plans to make over a dress that she did not particularly like.

"Well I made a dress for our 25th anniversary that the material was nice but I did not like it. It was just a dress. And it wasn't too comfortable. It was a long dress; I didn't wear it much after that. I was always going to make a top out of the skirt but I never got around to it. See it's just ingrained in you when you're little. When I was a kid at home my mother made over stuff all the time."

What did the women who sewed at home think? What stories could they tell about their sewing? What did home sewing mean to them?

All of the women who took part in this exhibit loved to sew. Their stories clearly show that sewing was a meaningful activity that went beyond simple fashion, fit or economy.

For many of the women that I spoke to, sewing was a survival skill. However, being able to make attractive clothing out of remnants, flour sacks or recycled materials gave them a sense of pride in their abilities.

For some, sewing was a skill passed down through female friends, neighbours or family members, creating bonds and even friendly rivalries between women.

None of these women expressed feeling constrained or restricted by their sewing. In fact, it gave many women the freedom to develop design skills and express their creativity in a socially sanctioned manner.

The women I spoke to were proud of their skills and of the clothes that they made. They enjoyed challenging themselves and creating unique, attractive garments. Wearing these garments, men, women and children worked, played and helped to shape Alberta's communities.

What does sewing mean to you?

Do you sew?

Did you once sew but you don't any longer?

Do you have any thoughts or memories about home sewing or your homemade clothing that you would like to share?

We would love to hear your stories, comments or thoughts about this exhibit! Please take a moment to sign our guest book and share your thoughts.

Thank You!!!

This exhibit would not have been possible without the generous help and support of the following people:

Joyce Cundict
Anna Duncan
Helen Duquette
Lois Gregory
Jean Jordan
Lois Lindholm
Marliss Meyer
Norma Robertson
Susan Robertson
Cathy Roy
Nellie Roy
Ruby Sills
Dianne Smiley
Gordine Thomson
Jeanne Westlund

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Mark Demers
Lucie Heins
Jessica Janus
Irene Karsten
Marijke Kerkhoven
Nancy Kerr
Anne Lambert, thesis supervisor
Bart Pouteau
Terri Thomson

The titles in this exhibit are taken from sewing features in *Chatelaine* and *Ladies Home Journal*, 1950-1970.

Letter of Information

Dear

You have been invited to participate in a research project that will focus on women's experiences of home dressmaking in Alberta in the 1950s and 1960s. As you sewed at home during this time, you have valuable experiences that can contribute to a broader understanding of women's history during this period. This letter will explain a bit more about me and the project that I am undertaking.

I am a Master of Arts student in Human Ecology at the University of Alberta. My study, being undertaken for my Master's thesis, is entitled *Creation of Meaning through Home Dressmaking in Alberta, 1950-1970.* The purpose of this study is to investigate what Alberta women's home dressmaking and homemade clothing meant to them in the 1950s and 1960s. It is anticipated that the study will be completed by October 2005.

A secondary purpose of this study is to create a museum exhibit that will showcase stories about home dressmaking and homemade clothes. Because a goal of this project is to give women credit for their skills, which are often employed 'behind the scenes' and not recognized, the participants in this study are being asked to agree to be identified. Another reason that I am asking you to agree to be identified is that I might ask to use images of you, quotes from your interview or pieces of clothing that you made in the exhibit, and would like to be able to include your name. In addition to the thesis and exhibit, other publications may result from this study. To thank you for sharing your time and experiences, you will be invited to an exhibit opening event in early 2005. With your permission, your contributions will be publicly acknowledged at the opening.

Interviews will take place in December of 2004 and January of 2005. The interview will be like an informal conversation with open-ended questions relating to your memories of what the home sewn clothing you made meant to you. If you have any clothing that you made or photographs of yourself or others wearing your home sewn clothing in the 1950s and/or 1960s, it would be helpful to bring these to the interview. Talking about the past may bring up unpleasant memories that you have forgotten. However, talking about the past can also be empowering and beneficial.

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Initial Interview Guide

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself in the 1950s and 60s.
  - Where did you live?
  - How old were you?
  - What were you doing during that time?

- When did you learn to sew? From whom?
- Did you ever take any sewing classes/lessons?
- What did you enjoy/dislike about sewing?
- When did you begin sewing clothes?
- Who did you sew for?
- How much of your wardrobe (your family's wardrobes) would you say that you made at home?
- During those decades, how often did you sew? Were there ever times during those decades that you stopped sewing or sewed less frequently? Why?
- How often did you sew?
- Why did you make clothing at home?
- Did you sew from patterns?
- Where did you obtain your sewing materials, patterns, etc.?
- What kind of selection was available to you?
- Where did you get ideas for clothes that you wanted to make?
- How would you describe the style of everyday clothing that you made?
- What did you like about that style of clothing?
- Did you like the popular styles of the 1950s/60s? What did you like/dislike about them?

- Can you tell me about some of the pieces of clothing or outfits that you made? (If visual aids present): Tell me about what you are wearing and what you are doing in this picture/Tell me about this piece of clothing.

- How did you feel about wearing (specific) clothes that you made? Do you remember making anything that afterwards you really loved/did not like? Why do you think that was?

- Did you sew alone or with someone else? Who? What was that like?

- Did you teach your children to sew? Why or why not? If not, did they learn to sew elsewhere?

- Do you still sew? Why or why not? [When/why did you stop?]

Final Interview Guide

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself in the 1950s and 60s.
    - Where did you live?
    - How old were you?
    - What were you doing during that time?
    - (If married) What did your husband do?

Make sure that you touch on:

- When did you learn to sew? From whom? (Did your mother sew?)
- Did you ever take any sewing classes/lessons?
- Do you remember your first sewing machine? (Can you tell me about it?) Was this the machine that you used during the 1950s and 60s?
- When did you begin sewing clothes?
- Who did you sew for?
- How much of your wardrobe (your family's wardrobes) would you say that you made at home?
    - Did that change during the 1950s or 1960s (i.e., did you make more or fewer clothes during either decade? Why?)
- During those decades, how often did you sew? Were there ever times during those decades that you stopped sewing or sewed less frequently? Why?
- Why did you make clothing at home?
- What did you enjoy/dislike about sewing?
- Did you sew from patterns?
- Where did you obtain your sewing materials, patterns, etc.?
- Where did you get ideas for clothes that you wanted to make?
- Did you read any ladies magazines or magazines about home sewing? Which ones? (Did you get pattern/fashion ideas from these?)
- Did you like the popular styles of the 1950s/1960s? What did you like/dislike about them? Which decade's clothes did you prefer? Why?

- Would you describe the clothing that you made as fashionable?
- How would you describe the style of everyday clothing that you made?
- What did you like about that style of clothing?
- What items were your favourite to sew? Why?
- Can you tell me about some of the pieces of clothing or outfits that you made? (If visual aids present): Tell me about what you are wearing and what you are doing in this picture/Tell me about this piece of clothing.
- Do you remember making anything that afterwards you really loved? Could you tell me about it?
- Did you ever make anything that you disliked when it was finished? Could you tell me about it?
- Did you sew alone or with someone else? Who? What was that like?
- Did you teach your children to sew? Why or why not? If not, did they learn to sew elsewhere?
- Do you still sew? Why or why not? [When/why did you stop?]
- If you were going to see an exhibit about home sewing, what would you like to see in it?